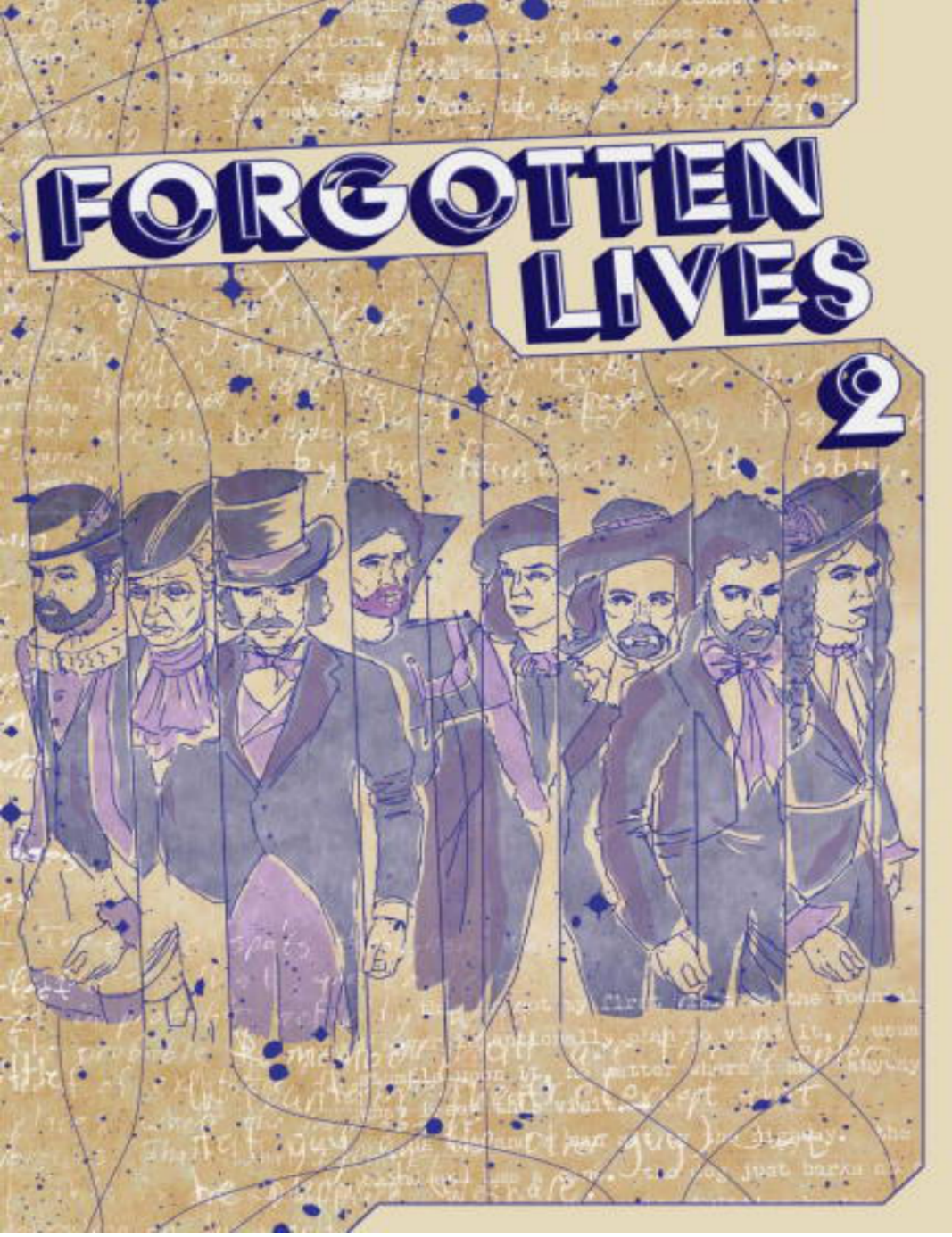
FORGOTTEN LIVES 2



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FORGOTTEN LIVES II

AN ANTHOLOGY IN AID OF ALZHEIMER'S CHARITIES

Edited by Philip Purser-Hallard

Stories by Aditya Bidikar, James Bojaciuk, Simon Bucher-Jones, Kara Dennison, Paul Driscoll, Jay Eales, Kenton Hall, Andrew Hickey, Matthew Kresal, Gareth Madgwick, Ian McIntire, Lance Parkin, Nicole Petit, Philip Purser-Hallard, Cody Schell and Daniel Tessier

Cover by John J Pearson

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PREFACE

The surprising thing is how familiar they feel now.

When half the authors of this current book set out in 2020 to imagine new stories for some very old Doctors, we had nothing to work on but the eight black-and-white photos of BBC production staff that briefly appeared onscreen in the 1976 **Doctor Who** story *The Brain of Morbius*. We had to discover for ourselves their personalities and adventures – their passions and habits, their companions and adversaries, their histories and even the genres of story they might have appeared in.

And that's how it felt – as if that first *Forgotten Lives* volume was a project of discovery, rather than invention. It was as if these Doctors revealed themselves to us: a medical man working his passage through history; an occult detective observing the London Blitz; an inventor travelling sci-fi worlds with his children; a bluffer chancing his arm at swashbuckling; a diplomat with an illicit passion for justice; an ambiguous figure meddling in the affairs of gods; a weary secret agent chafing at his tight leash; a flamboyant showman and conjurer. And all of them the Doctor – the same character who would one day flee his home with his granddaughter, kidnap two teachers from the 1960s to the Stone Age, and later still fight a reassembled Time Lord on a junkyard planet.

This time round the eight authors from our first book are joined by eight more, as well as our new cover artist John J Pearson, each of us exploring new territory and charting new histories as we work to recover more of these forgotten lives.

We hope you enjoy the worlds we have discovered.

THE ISLAND OF AEONS

by James Bojaciuk

Reprinted from the late January 1930 issue of Exciting Adventures.

Vermillion letters traced their way through the streets of Aurelia's capital, sealed with wax bearing the symbol of some house none could name. In handwriting like a spider's web, the letters offered eighteen months of work at sea. They offered gold, measured not in coins but in libra. In return, the author required the greatest secrecy.

Tight-lipped sailors issued out of alleys, dives, and bars. One lingered behind, buying round after round before tottering away. He nodded at a woman who watched with her only eye. At port he nodded with equal courtesy at the bear of a man on deck: Captain Mahon. The captain hardly responded as he endured the instructions of a finely dressed man who wore a neat beard. Curiously, he also wore a massive ruffled collar.

When the man departed below deck Captain Mahon sighed, 'We've been assigned a new surgeon, Juno help us.'

* * *

Amarone waves washed against the *Susanna*'s decks. Nearly crimson with silt, it whirled through the taffrail, over the glittering brass bar guarding the waterline, and back out into the port. Under the captain's steady hands, the *Susanna* sailed through the bustle. And what a bustle it was! The great port of the Aurelian Empire's capital, dressed in scarlet and purple, gilt in gold and burnished bronze, cast in more colours than the sunset could claim.

On they sailed, past the merchant ships carrying fine marble and cheap posca (the captain's nose wrinkled at the scent of the nearly spoiled wine). Past the naval ships, laden with troops. Past the two monuments to Man – seventy cubits if they were a pes, bronze glowing brighter than the sun in his strength. One held a sextant, measuring the cosmos. The other, more recently constructed, stabbed the sea. Sunlight caught the sextant; its reflection shone upward, cast against the clouds.

Pitch made certain the sun did not reach the sword. Before this hasty repair, the reflection cast across the harbour, blinding and bright. Two ships had caught on fire. Even the emperor and his idea of art cannot long resist merchants and their idea of lawsuits.

The captain took a long draw on his pipe. 'I think we made it out before anyone noticed.'

The mate merely grunted. The less he committed himself, the more wise he seemed.

Lighting a lucifer, the captain invited fire into his hand. He set a harsh herb to light and drew it deep into his lungs. 'Rum business. Mysterious as the deep. Agents show up with more gold than my bank can count. Can't refuse that.'

The mate grunted again.

'Even when they ask to sail off the map.'

The mate let the creaking wood and fitful sea answer for him.

The surgeon entered the conversation with a polite cough, emerging from below decks.

'And you?' the captain asked. 'Does the gold warm you to the fact that we shall spend a terribly long time in each other's company?'

'No, no, dear sir. Money is, quite literally, no object. I am present in service to humanity.'

The captain laughed.

'Is gold truly the motivation, hm? Doesn't adventure stir your soul? Exploration? Perhaps the chance to save your fellow man?' the surgeon asked.

The captain shook his head, tending more to the ship than to the conversation. 'You sawbones are all alike. You get paid to waste months of your life getting seasick. There's no true work in this. We'll exhaust our contracts and return to port without finding a thing. You think it'll help a soul?'

The surgeon shook his head. 'More than that, the secrecy does appeal to one's sense of the dramatic. How could I refuse?'

'If all it takes to employ you is the dramatic, next time I sail I will send mysterious notes and earn your presence for free.'

'Ah! But you'll need an enticement to take me from my patients again. Your work will be cut out for you to even match "we seek a lost island laden with the secrets of the ages." Though, of course, you must also write, "tell no-one."' With a casual air that did not extend to his eyes, the surgeon asked, 'Out of curiosity, did you?'

'Ha! No! For that price they could have my tongue as well as my silence!'

The mate only said, 'We're alone on the sea.'

A frigate, low and fast, darted out behind the *Susanna*. Though it wore the mark of a Celt ship, a folded black cloth in the hold told another story: a black flag embossed with bones.

But where was this expedition (and its shadow) set for?

Take out any map of the Eight Empires and trail your finger away from Aventine, the seat of Aurelian power. Feel the parchment yield to your touch as you avoid the islands, and issue out between the Pillars of Gwalchmei, where a shining brotherhood beat back the dreaming deep. The wide uncharted sea holds many such secrets. Their map showed places that yours would not: tracing the sunken stretches of Atlantis, from which no tales emerge, to the dead cities of dead gods. Some say the *Susanna* passed beyond the horn, others that they passed between the green shores of sand-choked Sanakht, still others that they ranged across the sea toward Aurelia's ally in the east, mist-shrouded Akitsushima. All that is certain is that they sailed from the known world, and into the domain of legend.

* * *

The weeks wore on and land felt foreign. Despite their pay, the crow's nest ceased casting their glance backwards – only looking for the next taste of soil.

The pursuer tasted their weakness with the relish a senator has for wine. They

rushed along the sea, casting up their colours in a parody of fair play. Borrowing the wind for speed, they closed the distance.

They came up on the *Susanna* with the sun, hidden by the eastmost glare. Riding waves for the stern.

The crew in the crow's nest strained their eyes westward, bowward.

The captain stared over his wheel, unconcerned.

The mate, back straight, watched nothing.

But one man tended to their wake, humming and consulting his eyeglass.

'We are not alone,' the ship's surgeon said, lowering his glass. 'And they wear unwelcome colours.' The other ship's flag snapped on the wind, displaying a skull with an X over one eye. 'I believe it's supposed to be winking at us.'

The captain whirled, snatching the surgeon's glass and throwing it to his eye. Dashing it to the deck with a cry, 'Raise the sail and all the men to the oars! We'll leave them behind in the sunrise!'

As the ship fell to activity, the surgeon tutted. 'No, no. We're much too large and too slow.' He left to prepare his tinctures and bandages. 'Much as I would prefer it otherwise...'

On the *Susanna* rowed, urged on by wind. The few remaining crew laid out swords.

Cannons port and starboard were loaded, readied.

Rowers eyed swords carefully, preparing to throw down tools and take up arms.

And the surgeon packed his medical bag, preparing to be present when the first wound was struck.

For all of that, the enemy skimmed over the water, gaining moment by moment, hour by hour. Always at their stern, never daring to cross the *Susanna*'s lines of fire.

Two hours before noon, the wind fell.

'Backs to it, men! Our strength is all we have!'

Tearing away his coat, the captain jumped down among them, taking an oar.

The wood bit their hands and muscles screamed as they pushed through endless waves.

When they looked back, they saw a ship packed with curs, and above them a one-eyed woman at the helm. Beside her, a brutal giant of a man, of the 'barbarians' who had resisted Aurelia for so long.

When the captain met her eye, the woman waved. Grinning, she pointed to her bow. Gave them an exaggerated stage wink.

The front of her ship was bedecked with small cannon hardly large enough to fire grapeshot, all mounted on ball joints. Her men loaded them with grappling hooks.

'Faster, men!'

But they were men against gunpowder. With a heart-shaking blast, they fired – and the hooks bit into the stern taffrail.

'Cut the lines! Cut the lines!' the captain shouted as he snatched up his sword. The mate at the wheel stood frozen.

The captain jumped up onto the helm. Too late! The pirate swarms had already scurried up the lines and five pirates, beards threaded with burning wicks, met him. The mate stood behind them, hands shaking. The captain only spared him one murderous glance before it began.

* * *

He rushed upon them, ducking under an awkward swing and parrying another with his sword.

Below deck, the surgeon heard the dire sounds of battle. Screams, and the sound of metal on metal. Extinguishing the candle, he hurried out of his small room and up the slim steps to the main deck.

It was already over.

Pirates surrounded the crew, keeping watch on them with curious wrought pistols. The barrels dragons and tigers cast in steel, dressed in bronze.

Only the captain was still allowed to fight, circling a brute of a man who towered over every person aboard. He dressed in the style of the distant south, but wielded a curved sabre from Rus. It was simple steel, without finery or embellishment. It was a blade just as he was: a raven-haired warrior of the north, fighting without the embellishments of the great empires.

'You could gun me down right now! Do you think this is funny?'

The captain made a wild swing as he spoke, easily caught with the curved sabre. The brute twisted his wrist and the sword flew away into the sea.

'No.' He backhanded the captain, who fell against the mast. 'It's necessary.' He spoke Aurelia's tongue without an accent.

The woman strode aboard, attire dyed deeply scarlet.

'Lovely!' She stopped in front of the captain. 'Hello! I'm Captain Sanguis, terror of all the seas. This is my fellow leader of these sea rats, call him Dagon. Anyway! Chain them up below, crew and captain both! Let's get underway!'

The surgeon interjected. 'Madam, where do you intend to take us?'

'The same place you were going. You've been sailing in almost a straight line. We can do that too.'

* * *

Perhaps they sailed north, on a sea of ice that cut like broken glass.

Perhaps they sailed east or west, lost in the coming and going of the sun.

Perhaps they sailed south, to the remains of the elder world.

North, east, west, or south, the *Susanna* boiled. Too many people, too little food, too much suspicion.

It started the first evening of their third month since capture, when Sanguis fired three shots into the air, one for the attention of the crew, and two, it seemed, for the pure enjoyment of it. She walked among them, stopping in front of the captain, ready to put on a show. He glanced once at her, then away.

'Now that the cabin fever's properly set in and softened you lot up, I think now's a good time for some parley. You'll find I'm a reasonable sort. Easy to work with. We don't shoot our prisoners and we don't trade in people. Terribly unsporting. We're here because we know you're heading to treasure. We have the same goal. Consider us partners. For now. If we're agreed, there's something I'd like you to do for me... the moneybags who funded this expedition is on board. I'd like to get a hold of the little weasel before he up and steals the loot right out from under our noses.'

Sanguis' words set the crew murmuring.

The captain glared at her. 'Absolutely not. You'd do the exact same thing.'

She laughed. 'I might, if it suits me better! I'll be sure to if you refuse me. But as I said, I'm *reasonable*. I don't go skulking about sending wax-sealed letters and hiding myself amongst honest crewmen. Better to work with the devil you know than the devil you don't, I say.'

'I know my crew better than you. They'd never –'

'You know *your crew*. But Mr Moneybags brought on some new faces, didn't he? I watched everyone who came on board. Not every face was familiar, not judging by your reaction.'

He glanced at the ship's surgeon, and she pounced on it.

'Ah! So it is you! You *do* look like a rich weasel. It's the collar, mate. So, do you have a name or should I choose one I like?'

'You may call me the Doctor.'

'Well, "Doctor", we're going to lock you up alone. Keep my treasure map nice and safe. With the dosh he was throwing around, he's worth two treasures. The one we're sailing toward, and the one we'll get in ransom for him. How does that sound?'

The captain stirred, looking her in the eye. 'I'm not convinced by the word of a pirate.'

'Never needed to convince *you*. I needed to convince them.' Sanguis gestured toward the crew, who watched her with more interest than they showed for months. 'What do you say, boys?'

One by one they gave their assent, and the captain sank down.

Sanguis crowed, 'Wonderful! Get back to work!'

* * *

'Land, ho!'

But to call it land may have been presumptuous. A chalky summit of rock, sea-dashed and barren.

'Prepare to land!' Sanguis shouted, waving her sword above her head. Less as a threat, and merely from the wild joy of doing it.

Sanguis playfully tapped the Doctor with her gun. 'You're coming with us.'

'I wouldn't dream of remaining aboard.'

She laughed. 'Look at you, making it easy on us. We don't have half the trouble we have with most hostages, I don't mind telling you. Take the ship's former captain too! We might need someone to test the traps for us!'

* * *

The landing vessels swarmed out across the beach, gathering as the only specks of colour on the ashy sand. In the oppressive atmosphere, they were nearly silent, and even Sanguis merely watched.

They dragged their ships onto the crop of rock that passed for a shore, and trudged inward. They met the mountain, and stopped. Some reached for guns, some for swords, and some simply ran. Neither Sanguis nor Dagon stopped them.

What stood over them was not a mountain.

The dead white was not chalk.

They stood beneath ancient bones scored white by ages of storms. The tattered remains of a titanic hand. Its fingers speared over the island, buried deep, as though it had been caught in the act of picking some treasure up.

Each finger terminated in a talon which was driven deep into the earth. A sailor touched one edge – and bled. His hand sliced open as though by a serrated blade.

Shrugging off the horror, Dagon pointed ahead.

A doorway stood deep in the mass of bone, nearly lost in the hollow tangle. Though certainly no larger than two or three men, its form was hazy in the thicket and glare.

'A pyramid!' a pirate ventured.

'A cylinder!' said another.

But Dagon growled, 'The treasure's inside,' and smashed a branch-like growth of bones to pieces. He walked through where they had been, ignoring the black marrow dribbling from the break. The pirates tried to avoid its stain.

He touched the edifice. With the practiced hand of a thief, he found seams – an entryway barely limned by the noontide sun. He grunted with satisfaction. Sanguis grunted with annoyance, and banged on it with the hilt of her dagger. The Doctor tried to catch her arm and failed. Deep in its hollow depths, they heard it reverberate.

'Must be bleedin' massive.'

The Doctor sighed. 'It's greater in scope than you could possibly imagine.'

All the while, Dagon continued to prowl for a way inside.

'I'd like to get to spending my treasure. So how do we get in?' Sanguis said.

'I fear that is my responsibility.' The Doctor laid his hand on the door. Silence reigned, and then the seam widened. The door did not open on a hinge, but receded away into the shadows.

We fear that darkness is a substance, something which even light cannot dispel. Dagon thrust a torch into the dark, and though it burned, the darkness held firm. The pirates muttered. Something stirred deep in the depths, something creaked awkwardly to life, and a low glow like bioluminescence caught the room. It was enough to walk by, and enough to see what lurked immediately before you.

An eight-sided altar ruled the room. An effigy to its god, presumably, mounted on top: a mysterious thing of diamond and curiously wrought metal, sealed inside glass.

Dagon walked past it, peering into the depths beyond this chamber.

Sanguis leaned on the altar and watched it. The Doctor tried to usher her away from it and the votive devices which lined the octagon, but she ignored him. 'They've got it trapped in a cage. Some god.' She rapped on the glass with her knuckles.

It shifted, lowering into the altar with a low growl.

An almighty sound rose from the depths.

On the far edge of the western continent they do not raise temples, but great gothic stones. In these stones they set bells bigger than a man and cast from iron. Those cloister bells repel the fair folk with a stroke, reverberating through the woods for miles around. The sound that roared from the depths of the tomb made those bells seem a cowardly thing.

* * *

Like a beast alive, the walls exhaled. The glow pulsed like a heartbeat. Dagon noticed these things and disregarded them, proceeding into the next chamber with seemingly no concern. But his eyes roved everywhere, testing every corner for a hidden cache.

The chamber extended out to the distance, lost in shadow.

'Where's the loot?' Sanguis asked.

'Loot? Ah, yes loot! You see this, ah, tomb constantly restructures itself. No one path will take us to what I seek. Instead, we must test our every step,' the Doctor said.

She considered that. 'Are there traps?'

'Undoubtedly.'

'Then you go first!' She prodded him along to the front, ahead of the dozen pirates and Dagon.

Pausing at each door which led off the corridor, he finally guided them through the seventh. Clouds ran riot, changing colour as they collided. Sanguis leapt back, covering her mouth with her sleeve.

'Quite harmless, quite harmless!' The Doctor waved his hand through one cloud, and made a show of breathing deep. 'As you may observe, my health remains intact. Follow me. This is hardly one of the dangers we face.'

They descended further inside, finding gently sloping ramps which guided them deeper. For a time, Dagon kept count of how many feet they progressed down, until he finally gave up. The numbers were too large to be believed. They crossed rooms shattered as though crushed from outside. They found what might have been libraries or museums, decayed or empty. Some rooms were reduced to slim, creaking walkways over a void. Dagon kicked some rubber over the edge. They never heard it reach the bottom.

'I believe we're nearly there. As much as it changes there are... certain commonalities that I am familiar with.' He led them into another chamber. Ancient statues stood at odd angles to one another, some pointing with strange objects, while others held them proudly. Each statue wore sumptuous robes, made of stone but somehow able to move as they stirred the air.

The dim light guttered, falling dark.

Dagon stopped. They could hear the grin in his voice when he spoke. 'We found the traps.' He glanced to the Doctor. 'Which way?'

The Doctor paused and answered, 'Somewhere just beyond this chamber.'

Dagon nodded, fire in his eyes, and led the way carefully.

The pirates in his wake were not so careful. One brushed against the hand of a statue whose collar put even the Doctor's to shame. Did the statue move? Was there some kind of wire or triggered panel? In moments, the pirate was dead – hair growing long and white, body wrinkling and bending him over with age. When the pirate keeled over, he collapsed into dust.

They had all stopped moving, but something stirred the dust – and tracked it along the floor.

'Something's here!' Dagon roared. He ripped his sword from its scabbard.

The spell was cast. A pirate was reduced to something plasticine and small, his scream falling to an unnatural stop. Another spell, from another wand – and a

sound like a distant echo cut across the room. Its effect was worse. The pirate fell dead, without impact, without violence. The body slipped inert to the marble.

Roaring, Dagon raced to challenge the thing.

'What the devil is that?' Sanguis demanded.

'Something that has been alive far, far too long.' The Doctor did not look its way.

It did not have too many arms, despite the number of wands. It did not have a body any different from the Doctor's, despite the way it slouched through doors and pulled itself grimly along. Its face, though cloaked, was a handsome man's.

But out of the corner of the eye...

Too many. Too much. Rotten, festering, stained – an unwrapped mummy, moist with decay. It was a dozen or more bodies, layered over one another, time on time.

Though they shared a goal, they did not quite share the same sentience, and the arms did not work in union. Three arms would down the same pirate, or crowd each other, spoiling a shot.

Sanguis did not wait for an answer – raising her gun, firing it into the mass, and springing forward with a wicked dagger. She landed upon its back, arm around where she would have found a man's throat.

Her blade met flesh which was no longer flesh, and there was a scream which was no longer a scream.

* * *

The Doctor took Captain Mahon's arm and hissed, 'I advise you to follow me.'

With surprising speed, he guided the captain around the statues, and to the far door. The Doctor laid his hand upon the stone, and it slid effortlessly open. In the fracas, someone screamed, and the Doctor frowned. 'I haven't the time to do what I wish, and barely what I ought.'

Another altar surmounted another room. Far less grand, it could only be a sanctum solely for the high priest's eyes. Gems mounted on the altar dazzled with unnatural light. The Doctor, unaffected, ran his fingers over them. 'It's much worse than I imagined.'

Another temple dedicated to the diamond god, this one dressed in thick cedar boards. The scent lay heavy, and the captain shook his head. Once more the altar was eight-sided, though now constructed from the same fine wood.

'So you only want the treasure after all.' The captain strained against his chains.

The Doctor stood before the altar, moving his hands over the votive instruments. 'Not at all. I meant what I said about my mission, but I fear...' He turned to look at the captain, his hands never slowing as he worked. 'Have you ever felt that the world is not as it should be? That all the drama and pageantry of history has been condensed and twisted out of sort?'

'You're avoiding the question,' he growled.

'I'm afraid it very much *is* the question. How is it that your Aurelia is both a great empire that stretches the world, but is hemmed in on all sides by other empires who claim the same? How does the technology vary so widely? Your people use swords, yet the pirates use firearms. Your ships still contain a deck for rowing, while they move faster purely by sail?'

Captain Mahon stuttered a reply. ‘I-it makes perfect sense to me.’

‘It’s all you’ve known. But it’s also quite wrong. I trust you are at least dimly aware of alchemy? Observation, depending on the party, creates the truth. A present moment can be transmuted into history. But what if something false was observed? Our friend outside found a wound in spacetime from the earliest days of conventional time. It should have closed on its own, but he held it open, rearranging spacetime to his whim. All of this was mere side effect...’

‘Why would someone do that?’

‘To live forever. To observe a world where age is no limit, and any number of lives could be lived in endless succession. It is against the laws of all nature.’ He paused, holding two thin strips of silver wire he had pulled from the altar. ‘Is it that simple, hmm? Connect these wires and the problem is solved, hmm? It costs the lives of millions, but millions who didn’t exist two weeks before I set out with you, at least from my perspective. Yes, I’m afraid that from my perspective your entire world – your entire history as recorded in every library and monastery – manifested on spacetime less than a year ago. You’re the afterimage of that… monster’s work.’

* * *

Awkward hands reached for Dagon’s throat. Laying over each other like scales, each increasing the pressure. He swung his sword for the thing’s middle, but met only air. Throwing down the sword, he locked his own hands around the thing’s own throat. It made a broken sound, nearly a chuckle.

But not every hand worked together. Some reached out for spaces around Dagon’s head, and others pulled at the wrists of those who choked him.

* * *

Captain Mahon held his breath until the Doctor laid the wires down.

The Doctor waved his hand over them. ‘To allow *you* to live is to annihilate every person who ever lived before. I would still every heart that ever beat. But to prune this wayward path of time, in this case, destroys lives no less real. You are not a tributary from time's river, or a film laid over the world with another path. You are a fully realised history. Can I remove this stain without creating one of my own?’

The captain stood beside him. ‘Am I of all people to be arguing for my world?’

‘No, sir. We’re arguing for the same side. At least, in a way. I do not wish for anyone involved in this affair to die.’

‘Well, it’s not as though you can stack my world on this other you speak of.’

The Doctor’s eyes sparkled. ‘Can I not?’ The Doctor set to work on a warren of wires. ‘Earth’s history is long. Longer even than your philosophers or the true Earth’s scientists suspect. Unknown epochs stretching to elder days. And there is room in those days for an earlier history. I can move everything earlier, further back along time.’

‘I don’t –’

‘I can move this strand of time much earlier in Earth’s history, so early that none will know. Few traces will survive into real history. Maybe a curious

mechanism dredged from the sea here, or impossible coins there, but nothing that will wound true history.' He set to work on the altar. 'That, and I may excise the cancer in the process...'

* * *

Moments were caught in flickering foxfire. A sword raised. Dagon's teeth clenched, the horror washing over him in a wave. A scream, as his vision was occupied by darkness. And then, Dagon and Sanguis leaning against one another, bloody and beaten, but alive.

The Doctor and Captain Mahon emerged, and he sadly observed they were the only ones who yet lived.

Sanguis stared them down, and raised her pistol. 'Look at that, the weasel did skulk off to take the loot, just like I said. Didn't expect the honourable captain to run off with him. Caught me off guard – that doesn't happen often. Well done, you! Seems like we've got more bloody work, Dagon.'

'Captain Mahon?' the Doctor asked.

The captain raised a device much like what the thing had wielded. For a moment nothing happened, as Dagon rushed toward him and Sanguis raised her gun. They stopped, wrapped in a shimmering sea blue that held them in place.

'That's the end of them.'

'Hardly. It's only a stasis field. Holding them secure. I've done what I can to save everyone alive in your world, and that certainly includes them. We'll get the crew to collect them, and we may return them to the relevant authorities.'

* * *

They emerged to find a transformed landscape. Trees belonging to a jungle rose around them, heavy with vines and wild.

'Don't be surprised. While everyone, and most buildings, will be intact, there are... certain complications. The flora and fauna will in some cases shift considerably, as will the weather. You are in a new era.'

The brush shook. Something took mighty steps toward them.

'I fear that may be one of the new inhabitants.'

It knocked a tree away with its head and roared. Teeth like daggers stood in the jaws of a head as big as them. A king among reptiles.

'I suggest we run!'

RETROGENESIS, Part 1

By Philip Purser-Hallard

Excerpt from *The Kelda*

‘Did I ever tell thee of the time they tried to break up the Kelda Stone?

‘That were when old Squire’s grandpa was nobbut a boy, who’d just come into his inheritance. Six generation his forebears been our Squires then, and every one on em respected Kelda Stone, but not he. Oh no, not Squire Stephen. He didn’t like un cluttering up his land, he said, making un untidy, and damned to all who telled him it were ill fate for him and village if un were moved.

‘Moving un, though, now that’d take a team of strong horses, oxen mebbe, and Squire reckoned he’d a better plan. He’d get his men to drill holes in un, he said, and fill em up with gunpowder. Then he’d light em all up and blow apart old Kelda Stone. When un were all in bits, then he could move un all right.

‘Well, the big men of the village went and begged him not to do un, then the church elders, even the wise women. But Squire Stephen reckoned he knew better. He telled them all they old stories were nobbut superstition and nonsense, and he’d not let heathen legends and old wives’ tales stop him clearing out his land.

‘So then the folk went to see the Vicar, but he threw his hands up and said as he couldn’t go agin Squire. There was nowt in his Bible about no Kelda, he telled them, nor no messenger to this world from Heaven, except it were our Lord. So they seed they couldn’t hope for help from him.

‘And so they went to call on the Doctor.

‘Up from London, Doctor were, though he said as he’d been down in Cornwall before. He were a clever fellow, kind and knowing, and giving of his time. Since he come he’d helped us folk with all kinds of ills, and our beasts and fowl too. He knowed the secrets of herbs like any wise woman, but he’d listen to all they tell him of em too, and write down aught he learned in a great book.

‘And so, when folk came to see him with their fears about Kelda Stone, the Doctor didn’t send em away like Squire did, or Vicar. Not him. He listened.

‘They telled him what we all know of Kelda Stone – how it were brung here by the Kelda, one of God’s angels, back in the time long, long ago, before the legions of Rome ever come to this land. And how markings on the Stone be the language of the angels themselves. And how Kelda come here to talk to folk from God, but found this world too sinful to hear un’s message. And how Kelda sleeps now, inside the Stone, waiting till folk are ready to hear what un has to say.

‘All this thee knows, and so does I, and so do all us folk of the village, for ever so many years now. But it was all new to the Doctor, for all his books of medicine and his London learning.

‘He listened to un carefully, writing un all down in his great book. And when they’d telled him all the story of the Kelda and of what Squire meant to do, he sat back and he looked em over, and then he smiled at em.

‘And he said to em, “Perhaps it’s time somebody woke the Kelda up and had a word or two.”’

THE HAND OF NIGHT AND SHADOW

by Simon Bucher-Jones

The following account is taken from the correspondence and papers of Doctor John Unonius (17?? – 187??) of the Cornish village of Polpeor, and Doctor Medec, formerly of Helston, for the year 18_1. Unlike others of Doctor Unonius' papers it was not edited for publication by Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch ('Q') and has only recently come to light.

The black and white screen shows a hand writing a letter with an old-fashioned fountain pen and a pot of ink. Its cuffs are the ornate lace associated with the late 18th or early 19th century. A plummy voice narrates...

My dear mentor and friend, I trust that your retirement – ah, how could a man tear himself away from Cornwall? – finds you well. I have taken up the practice here that you were kind enough to suggest for me, close enough to cover your old stomping grounds, and find the people honest and engaging. Goodness knows how long I will be spared to pursue my doctoring, still less my wider interests in biology – for, if matters on the continent proceed as they appear to be heading, there will be a tyrant in France to threaten our Cornish sea-farers before too long, and I foresee that I may be called upon to take up arms! This is a prospect that your age, no matter how lightly you persist in carrying it, will likely spare you! Do not think I resent that, by the by – after your many years of dispensing medicine to these good folk, it is hardly surprising you might wish to have more leisure to address matters of your own, and the fight against tyrants is a matter for young men, but I find I must write to you concerning our mutual friend the Rector of St Winwaloe's. He has grown progressively frailer since your departure and is considerably enfeebled, and I suspect he may shortly go to his final reward. It would, I am sure, be of use to him if you were to make a visit, for while *timor mortis conturbat*2 and the medicines of man can only do so much, the voice and presence of an old friend is a great comfort. Further, I have reason to believe that something is pressing upon his mind, for he has occasionally made an attempt to unburden himself to me, but being perhaps aware of my youth, and fearing the censor of modern thought – a thing which you know me to be guiltless of! – he has always stifled the confidence which he might freely have made to you.
I trust that you and your wife are well, and remain yours sincerely.

John Unonius, M.D., Esq.

* * *

A hand writes swiftly and, though its arm too is clothed to fit the period and it seals the letter with wax after the fashion of those times, the pen that it sets aside is made of

stainless steel, and has a precisely engineered ball at its tip.

Dear John

Poor Daveth. I will of course come as soon as arrangements can be made.

I would, in honesty, welcome the excuse your letter provides me with to make a temporary parting from my wife, whose temper is always terrible in winter, as the local season is one to which she is unaccustomed, were it not for the serious nature of your news, which mitigates the jest! You may expect me soon after this letter, if not before it – in which case, accept what are likely to be duplicate apologies for my unexpected and sudden arrival! Signora Zodina will, I am sure, seize upon the chance provided by my absence to depart for a time to the Summer Lands[3] pending my return, and all will – I have no doubt – be smiles again when we are finally re-united. What it is to have married a personage of independent temperament and equal powers of action, but I would have had it no other way, for it is between equals that true harmony is found, even if it is at times disturbed by argument. I appreciate that my decision to move on from Helston after so many years rankled with the young Squire and Daveth, as well as some of my patients – and I will always have the highest regard for the town, and the coast and country of Cornwall (for I can not think of it as a mere county of England), but just as I had sometimes to travel, often at infuriatingly short notice, to attend to patients beyond Cornwall, so I had reasons that the ethics of my profession forbear disclosing for withdrawing from Helston to take a wider tour of the world. I have been in many a place since we last spoke, and your letter finds me in Romney of the Marshes. There is more for me to do yet, for there are still problems elsewhere that demand my attentions, and while none is so pressing that I cannot respond to your letter at once, they will only become more so if I neglect them thereafter. I beg you not to press me upon this point, just as I would never inquire of your own ministrations or the confidences you might have overheard, save for necessity. No matter, for it will be some time before the disease[4] I am called upon to prepare a ministry against grows towards its climactic, and I remain of course your friend and well-wisher. Look for me most shortly.

Yours sincerely.

Doctor Medec, M.D., F.C.S., etc., etc. – and I have no intention of listing all the blasted things – they accrue like limpets on a ship!.

* * *

A man sits in a barn, surrounded by books – also carpentry tools, and a hamper of food and drink. Though working with his hands, he is clearly well provisioned.

Papers, John Unonius –

The wind in the eaves of the old place in Polpeor sings old songs – and it is good for a young man to hear them, even if it requires extra blankets to make the experience enjoyable, and a man must first construct his bed as well as make it. My parents find it hard to imagine that I prefer a ramshackle barn that I must

rebuild, to a room in the house where I was raised, but I intend to make my own way. Polpeor needs a Doctor, and a Doctor needs a place from which to practise. Pleasant as Helston is to visit, it is too over-filled with humanity for me.

Foreign news – such as reaches me, a week or more after it reaches London – remains gloomy. My news, if I had a way to impart it to Doctor Medec, is no better. His letter says he will be with me shortly, and I must assume he is on his way. Lord grant that he does not come too late to sit with his old friend. I fear that to be by his side is all the good that can be done now. Daveth is thin, surly, drinks little and eats less, and the fierce light of intellect and also of kindness that I knew in his eyes is misted over with age. This would be hard enough, if he were not so clearly half mad with fear. A churchman should not fear the end, and it is not perhaps that solely of itself, which is the cause of his alarm. Rather he seems to fear that some retribution or calamity will strike, this side of death – as if he raced to die peacefully in his bed, content to do so if he could only reach death without the change or revelation whose prospect so shakes him. I can not believe he ever wronged man or woman. His life was so far as I know without stain. If he lived quietly and without grand achievements in the world, he helped the people that knew him, and was well regarded.

'Is well regarded,' I should write – it is very easy to begin to compose a eulogy for Daveth's successor to read, as if nothing now were possible for him. Perhaps Doctor Medec may be able to help him. I must hope so.

* * *

Doctor Medec rides up to the barn on his black horse. The man is not noticeably older in appearance, perhaps a few years at most, than when he first came to Cornwall, though it must have more than been twenty years before. He wears a short cape over his heavy clothes which ruffles in the wind
as he dismounts.

Papers, John Unonius –

I wake to the sound of a much respected voice shouting in exasperation. It is the good Doctor, at last seeking admission. I will set his words down as well as I can recall them, for they are characteristic of him, I fully believe.

'John, hark ye – let a man in! The night wind is chill enough without dawdling. I want to hear how matters stand now before I go to the Rector's house.'

I answered that I was pleased beyond measure to see him again, and after craning from the barn's upper window to do so – for it was there I had set out my bed – I hurried down to let him in. Mindful of the needs of hospitality, I opened the door with the offer of 'a glass of something' before he would need to ride on.

'That, you have no need to ask – for I have had long enough to learn how to take Cornish hospitality,' he answered. 'A small glass, though, for a young Doctor must watch the pennies. Oh wait! I had forgotten my manners...'

And bowing, Doctor Medec handed me a bottle of brandy. 'If you say nothing against the smugglers of Romney Marsh, I will leave you with this token of their

activities – which leave them open to needing the services of a Doctor for night chills and suchlike agues. Like the Cornish, they often pay in kind. Now, shake out two glasses, and tell me of Rector Malcolm's disease.'

I did so, and stirred the embers of the fire to life – we drank and I told him how Daveth fared. 'I was inclined to think it age alone at first. He is in his sixties, but the symptoms are more than that – or are perhaps that, intensified. He has lost weight, and interest in eating. He shakes and trembles. He has fevers, though they are short in duration, and irregular.'

'And his temper is bad?' Medec asked.

'I did not say so.' I responded.

'Yet, he is ill and has a large house – while you repair an old barn. Why do you not attend him in situ? A friend would stay with a sick man unless forbidden.'

His ability to deduce circumstances, from the smallest clews, remained.

I nodded. 'Well you, are right – he will have no one about him. He has driven away his housekeeper of many years with bitter words, and shuns any visits, finding even mine almost intolerable. He has ceased to preach, and the parishioners are sore pressed – though thus far their pride and old love for him has prevented their applying to the Bishop for a replacement priest. But, despite all that – I would not call him ill- or evil-tempered. I would call him afraid, both for himself and for others. He drives people away, to my mind, so that they do not suffer what he fears for himself, or because – perhaps – he fears that his end, or the approach of something before that end, might be witnessed. Death is a hand of night and shadow, that reaches out to gather us in – and even the hope of a light thereafter does not make the terror of that hand easier.'

Doctor Medec stroked his beard thoughtfully, and set down his empty glass on the rough table.

'Many may prefer to go to that final change unwitnessed. Maybe more – if truth were told – than desire to lie abed with their hand in another's. I will ride on to the hall at once and talk with him, but if he will not confide his terrors to me, I cannot pluck them from his head. Indeed, I would not, for what sanctuary would a man have if not his own skull?' He got up and shook my hand and clasped my shoulder. 'I will go now. If I can, I will return and speak with you again, John – if he permits it, having spoken to me – or if he will not, well, then I will come and commiserate. Get yourself back to bed. I'm sure the morning will bring work and sunlight both.'

'You do not wish me to accompany you?' I asked – fully prepared to do so, despite the hour. 'What if you cannot rouse him, or he will not let you in?'

'I do not intend to ask.' Doctor Medec flourished a large bunch of assorted keys. 'I was once trusted with spares for many of the households around Helston, and the local locksmiths followed four or five templates. I fear I forgot to return some of these before now, and I suspect I have one that will open the Rectory.'

And so, my old friend rode to help our mutual comrade. Little did I know then, that I would see neither alive in this world again.

* * *

Here the story is taken up by a letter written later to Doctor Unonius, to recount

matters which – for reasons which will be made clear – Doctor Medec was unable to divulge in person as soon as he might have wished.

The hand which is seen to write this letter is differently shaped, that of a larger man, and the handwriting is also altered, though it has a haunting quality reminiscent of Doctor Medec's – as of a relation, or someone taught by the same schoolmasters.

John

I am sorry that my brother did not – as he expected – return to talk with you. By the time you get this letter, the body of Daveth Malcolm will have been found, and there may be a hue and cry. You may be asked to account for your visits there, and you may be also be required to tell the authorities all you know of my brother. Fear not, and do so. I know he did not take the Rector's life, and as I will tell you, he did all that he could to save him. As for Doctor Medec, well, he has gone where no mortal justice of the peace can cause hands to be laid upon him. I will eventually have to take up his place in Romney, at least until things there are concluded, but I know no more than you how anyone may reach the Doctor Medec that was your friend. He is only a memory, and has gone where memories are remembered eternally.

As Daveth rests in peace – and as there was to my mind no need for guilt in all this matter – I will set down here all that my brother learned and experienced, and leave it to you as the present Doctor of Polpeor, to determine whether or not it is anyone's business in this world. It will make matters clearer if I write his account as he would have done, had he been able.

Doctor Medec's account

I let myself into the house, which was dusty and untended – as the dismissal of the housekeeper had led me to expect. The kitchen seemed nearly unstocked with food, though there was a pan on the stove which might have seen use in the week before for soup or a thin gruel, and which had gone uncleaned. There was a supply of ship's biscuits, and mouse-trap cheese with only a hint of fur, but not much to sustain an invalid. I believed then I might need to settle here for a week or so, and had begun making a mental list of provisions, when I saw something scuttle across the floor.

The light was dim, for I was relying on the first rays of dawn through the kitchen window, and I at first took what I was seeing for the impression, enlarged by motion, made by a smaller thing – a mouse, or a spider still larger than normal but not monstrous. But as I struck a spark from my tinder-box to light up a candle, I saw the thing squeeze itself dislocatingly into a hole in the skirting boards, and it was no mouse, nor a spider howsoever large, but the severed hand of a man or woman, moving of itself – as if imbued with an independent life without the benefits of heart or brain or stomach for sustenance. If I were prone to hallucinations or visions, I would have considered myself struck mad, but I have had no reason to doubt my facilities before this and did not do so. Instead, I observed the disturbances in the dust and saw that they could be accounted for by the sweep of fingers as they drummed and served in the capacity of legs. This was a material hand which left marks of its passage. I found a long knife and made a

few tentative jabs into the hole in the skirting so as to see if it were still near, but neither sound nor impact resulted. Nor could I, by remaining still for a time that sore preyed upon my slight patience, tempt it back. That there was so strange a thing in the house, suggested that it must be involved in the Rector's illness and withdrawal from the lives of his flock, and I climbed the stair intending to confront him – not as a man confronting a rogue, but as a Doctor seeking a proper and full disclosure from a patient which it must always lie in their best interests to give their physician.

Having been told that he was near death, that he was beaten down and fearful – the last think I expected was to find him sitting up in bed reading an edition of the first part of Goethe's *Faust*[5], with every appearance of enjoyment. I was disheartened by the sight when I took in the feverish aspect of his eyes, and remembered that before my hasty departure from Helston the volume in question had been tucked away on my own shelves.

'Oh, surely a man of the church draws a line at the theft of books?'

'Do you not recall giving me carte blanche to peruse your shelves on one occasion? That was careless, Doctor, if you wished to preserve your reputation of normality – but then it was, I suppose, too late for that. The village gossips and the town rumour-mongers alike had begun to wonder at the blackness of your beard and the strength of your hands after twenty years. Still, while you did not confide in me, I suppose I am not surprised you are here at my end, and I am perfectly willing to return the play, which I cannot but conjecture is unlikely to end well for the protagonist. Goodness me, no! That would never be allowed.'

He sounded bitter and unlike the generous and gentle man I had known.

'This isn't like you, Daveth. If you have something to say, say so plainly. Many folk are worried about you. I have had letters from more than one imploring my return to address your illness.'

'Illness! Would it were an illness you could cure, old friend.' He gave the final words a curious turn in his mouth as if he disliked the taste of them, or was making a joke that I couldn't see the point of – for we *had* been friends, on my part.

'I made the mistake, you see, of looking too much into the past. The temptations of an antiquarian, you might say. The magistrate at Launceston, generations ago, the great-grandsire of the Malcolms, condemned many a man to death on the gallows. But the first there recorded, one "bloody Abbot" whose crimes were not set down, so awful must they have been – 1576 it was or 1577? I forget – was one who was to become a curse on the Malcolm family. Was the man one whose surname was Abbot, or did he affect the clothing of a Monk, as some attested? No-one living now can say, but his body was not permitted to hang undisturbed. You must know – so erudite a man as you must – of that supposed practice of black magic in which the hand of a murderer is cut from his hanged body and turned into a powerful talisman – the Hand of Glory?'

'I have heard of such nonsense,' I said – but I felt a twinge of fear, for as I have said to you, John, there is no legend and no myth that does not contain some truthful lesson, and one lesson is that all things must pass, good and evil, and that to attempt to renew that which is gone is perilous, for tools made from the dead are rarely profitable for the living.

The Rector nodded, and continued. 'I too had read of such things, but never

thought to see one, still less to have it involved in my own, ah, life. Fingers topped with candles made of the fat from the murderer's body, such a Hand is supposed to cast a sleep upon a household when they are lit, and to open every door – a boon to thieves. Odd that, turning the spirit of a murderer to mere pilfering – don't you think? A proud Abbot might resent such a diminution.'

'You found one?'

'I found *that* one – Abbot's hand, recovered by the authorities from its hapless maker and returned to the store-room of the jail in Bodmin, and from there to the amused ownership of Sir Jack Malcolm, magistrate. For years it remained in the family, and then was lost to history, until I rediscovered it. Or I should say it was almost lost to history, for there is also a family ghost story associated with it that began a generation after.'

'I have seen the hand crawling on the floor, Daveth – it is no ghost, but flesh and blood. Pull yourself together man, and let us go roust it out and lay the thing. You may have feared its attacks, on yourself or on others, but I am here now.'

'So, you are. Do not let its motion alarm you– it cannot persist for much longer, and I have more to tell you before matters resolve themselves. The ghost story then, for it was its implicit lore that produced the Hand's discovery.

'It was in Jack Malcolm's grandson's time – midway through the 17th century, for the family bred young. The boy had fixated upon the Hand as a strange and fearsome relic, and longed to own it, whether to use it to affright his peers or merely to gloat upon it the narrative does not say. One night, taking advantage of a great storm which roused and confounded the house and set all in confusion, he broke the glass that protected it, and carried it off – but so the story goes that, running with the Hand beneath his coat by the ash tree, the poor boy was struck by lightning, as was his severed burden. The boy died, and thereafter the family descended from his brother, but the servant who discovered the body went quite mad, for when he found the boy there resting upon the last falling breath of his seared chest – was that dreadful Hand, its candle-wax burned way, and its talon fingers animated by that celestial power.'

'And this a madman was able to recount and have people believe?'

'Oh, more than that, for the motion of the hand persisted, it is said, for four days and nights, and in that time the boy's father, Sir Arthur Malcolm, learned something that drove him to his cups and his own death, something that destroyed his faith and his belief in a fair and just world. You see, they gave the Hand a pen and parchment to see what it would do.'

Again, we see a hand with a pen, a goosequill this time. The hand, gnarled and blackened, is severed and leaves a black ichorous trail from its wrist as it moves to write.

'Now that was a fine story, Doctor Medec, was it not? If only antiquarians and delvers into forgotten matters would ever rest and cease. For learning of the erstwhile existence of the Hand, and of this legend attached to it, Daveth could not drive the matter out of his head. He had a suspicion, given the nature of the Hand's message, that he knew where he might find it, and he was right. It had been buried with the body of the boy. The thing grew into an obsession within him. How could he preach love and sanity to his flock if such things were possible? Whether black magic or some evil perversion of nature, he needed to resolve in his own mind the conflict with his faith – and because of his faith, he

also feared something worse. You will have guessed, of course, the message written by the Hand.'

'You make it obvious enough. You have even begun to refer to Daveth in the third person, as if you were not he – and if that is so...'

'You are quick enough in your way. Yes – the awful message scrawled by that lightning-struck Hand was that the spirit that animated it in its agony, was not that of the murderer Abbot – not any longer – but that of the child Samuel Malcolm, killed in the middle of an act of theft and disobedience to his parents. Killed without benefit of final rites, or repentance – a year short of conformation in the Church of his fathers. A soul lost – lost by an act of God, for such is a lightning-bolt. If such a tale was true, how could Daveth enter a pulpit and proclaim to all the workings of the providence that we are told shapes every life? Worse, still did that spirit still suffer in the rotting hand – had it truly died? For even in Hell we are told there may be a harrowing and chance for balm, but out of a trap of blackest sorcery could any soul gain freedom – except perhaps by the sacrifice of another, as maybe that of Abbot did, in place of Samuel's?'

As he spoke, the door to his bedroom, which I had pushed to behind me – not so that it closed fully, but just to close out the draft – began to move, and turning at the sound it made, I saw in the doorway on the ground, the moving Hand.

'Daveth believed he was doing good, but he feared the misunderstanding of others, who might prevent him accomplishing what he wished, and his doubts were sore upon him. He strove to discover whether the legend was true, and if so to find a way to guarantee the release of Samuel's spirit. He drove away those who might stop him, and adopted an illness to explain his seclusion. He reasoned that the science of galvanism, by which the limbs of dead frogs had been made to move, might enable him to set the Hand in motion without the requirement of a thunderstorm. He hoped by learning to find a way to save the soul within it, or at least to let it pass without pain.'

'Oh, Daveth, he should have written to me – why did he not ask for my help?'

'Why not? Is that not obvious? He had, or believed he had, reason to fear that there was after all in tales of magic and devilry, some awful truth – yet one which destroyed and left no gap for the faith he had long struggled with. In you, he saw a man of strange and mysterious knowledge – of brooding and at times angry intensities – a man who, in twenty years, had hardly aged. A man whose bookshelves contained works as yet unwritten, of deals with devils. What else could the foolish man fear in his extremity but that you, his supposed friend, who had never confided in him one iota of your secrets, might be the very black magician of his nightmares. A creature that denied God, not by standing against him, but by making him seem impossible or irrelevant. Why would a priest look to you for hope of faith, Doctor? You'd only tell him spirits were Angaels from the planet Angaelus, or that the spiritual polarities 'twixt severed hand and obsessed boy had been reversed. You had nothing that he needed, and you never did have.'

'I had friendship. Friendship doesn't mean agreement on all things; it means acceptance – of secrets as much as anything. He would never have judged me as you wish to, nor I him. His beliefs were not mine to destroy.'

The hand tugged at my trouser cuff, and in the dust of the floor I saw that it was trying to write, but I already knew what it was attempting to say.

I wasn't talking to Daveth – the mind in the body was that which had been in

the hand. I did not believe either that it was the boy Samuel, for by the account I had heard via Daveth's lips he had not yet been confirmed, and the sacrament of confirmation is conferred when a child is seven or eight, unless there is a grave reason to suggest otherwise. This was no seven-year-old with whom I had converse. This, I believed, was Abbot – or perhaps I should say, as this is likely my final message to you, John, and I have been, I am sure, as mysterious to you as to Daveth – the man who called himself 'the Abbot,' for he, like me, is one who makes his way through the world over many, many long years and attempts many, many things. I hope you know, John, that I have always striven for good – to have and to do my duty – to help those who can be helped. I have not sought power or reward, except the power and reward that is knowing that I have tried. Often, I have failed and paid for my failures.

The Abbot is like me, yet not like me, and I believed that he had met his final fate on the gallows, but it seems that he had, literally up his sleeve as conjurers say, as it were a final trick – the preservation of his spirit in a part of his body, and an old story that would make that body-part attractive to a weak-minded wretch, for what else is a thief? He intended always to take the body of the foolish would-be magician who would have harvested his hand: weaponising – a barbarous word I know, forgive me the coinage – the legend of the Hand of Glory. Something must have prevented his possession of that thief – perhaps the diligence of the thief-takers of Cornwall – but it was providence that saved Samuel. It was not the lightning that facilitated so evil a crime as the displacement of the boy's spirit, but the stroke of the thunderbolt that prevented it, while the boy was still himself. In the hand, the Abbot must have writhed and twisted, looking for a way to present itself to Arthur Malcolm as his son – in the hope of gaining, perhaps, possession next of the father himself.

I said much of this aloud, not to confront the Abbot, for he and I understood each other already far too well, but in the hope that some of what I say now to you was a comfort to the trapped spirit of Daveth, if he had some way of hearing or understanding me. I wanted him to know I did not judge his doubts of me, nor his own crisis of faith – and that I certainly did not consider that his beliefs, which had brought good and comfort to so many, should be mocked by this thing that sat in his bed and body.

I picked up the Hand and put it on my shoulder, where it rode like a parrot on a pirate. Its forefinger moved softly against my cheek and I hoped that meant he had indeed understood.

I fastened my gaze on the body of the Rector – piously and primly propped up on stolen pillows, and comfortable in stolen bedsheets. Theft made flesh.

I have at times been able to reason with the Abbot – for, although his goals were not mine, and he had long abandoned both empathy and duty, he wasn't – or at least he hadn't been until now – a breaker of things for the sake of breaking them. He might have plucked the wings from a fly to make a filigree of art to exchange for something he truly wanted, but he would not – once at least – have harmed a fly from spite. Now I wasn't sure. We become what we do, over long enough. If a man causes pain and grief and doubt, is it any defence to say they were incidental to his aims? He could have chosen different means, or accepted a slower way. Still, duty demanded I try, and I, also, am what I do.

'You expected me to come. What do you want from me?'

‘Come sit on the bed beside me, and I’ll tell you. You can bring your little friend – it cannot harm me.’

The Rector’s voice was now, as I listened carefully, not his own – for while the vocal cords were his, the strumming of them was ordered differently, and his phrasing was different from Daveth’s. It was, I suppose, almost like listening to myself in a way. I tell myself that flatters the Abbot, but it may say something about me.

* * *

‘I want your body, of course – not this one. Image my delight to learn from Daveth’s body-memories that he knew you! These interim steps seem almost meant to return me to my true status. We will commune, you and I, and it will be I who rises and walks out of here. We can arrange it, if you wish, so that Daveth is returned to this body – in fact I offer it you as a sweetener. Your own resting place will be less roomy, but no doubt you will find it handy enough when you get used to it. Some gothic family might take you in, as a talking point or servant. Maybe eventually you’d grow a body again. I prefer not to wait any longer.’

Out of the corner of my eye I caught the Hand waving a warning finger. Daveth refused to have me sacrifice myself for him. Of course he did, he was still a good man – but so, I hoped, was I, and besides I had an idea. It was likely to be fatal, but when had that ever stopped me?

‘Oh, let’s get on with it then,’ I said rudely, because anything I could think to cloud the Abbot’s judgement might be useful – he was thinking with another man’s brain and that always shakes things up, so I might just have the edge. I mean no disrespect to Daveth there, but just like wearing someone else’s trousers, using someone else’s grey matter is uncomfortable, can lead to misunderstandings and you never really can be sure what might be in the pockets.

The Rector – that is the Abbot – hopped out of bed, and I saw he was clothed under his night gown, which spared some blushes. ‘I have adapted the galvanic machinery in anticipation of your arrival. Let us repair to the study, and I see no reason why the two of us might not share a brandy before we affect the transformation.’

I know, John, all this must be very hard to understand and perhaps harder to believe, but I assure you I am telling you the truth of everything that occurred. If finally, there are things I must leave out, I hope you will think about my earlier remarks concerning secrets and how they can exist even in friendships, and perhaps that they are friendship’s justification. I leave out nothing that is needful.

* * *

The galvanic apparatus with which the impetus of cellular life had been returned to the Hand of Glory had been, when it was the Rev. Daveth Malcolm’s construction, a simple circuit. It could have accomplished nothing if the spirit and bile of the Abbot hadn’t been seething and circling in the Hand’s cell structure – in a kind of biological stasis. But by interrupting that stasis it had acted as an

alarm call, just as I suspected the psionic component of poor young Samuel's obsession had once done. The new apparatus – constructed with the Abbot's knowledge – was far more complicated, involving aspects of a science which I fear I can not easily explain in this letter, nor would it be safe for me to do so.

I can give you some idea of its appearance, which was a massive circle or hoop of wiring, to which the Abbott attached all three of us. He chatted as he did so, and the cheerfulness of his manner made me really quite cross.

'This is only a facilitator, mind you. I don't claim much for its longevity either, so don't try any tricks, Doctor. Both our fates and that of your good friend are at stake. If it seems unfair that you must draw so short a straw as become a hand without a body, remember that you are doing your duty to the Rector. Besides, I shall have to put up with looking like you – at least for a while – and that could be very embarrassing for me, so this is by no means an unalloyed pleasure on my side of the turnstile.'

'You could have called it "The Wheel of Bodies,"' I suggested.

'But that would imply that where it stops no-one knows, and I do know.'

'As if the Wheel isn't gimmicked, in every fairground. Just spin it, then.'

To be pulled from one's body and placed in another is conceivable because of how we think of the mind or the spirit, but while the effect is so, the actual causes are myriad and profound. By that I mean not the cause of the device being activated, but the millions upon millions of changes that have to take place. Neurons must learn to fire differently. Pathways must be rewoven. Memories must be copied, stored, moved, others must be over-written as if the mind was a palimpsest. It is hard to explain this, but the main thing that it involves is stress and damage. Even for those entities for which this process is natural – for such exist, in this strange vast cosmos – there is no complete edge to the self, no certain absolute delineation of the boundary between possessor and possession. So as Daveth began to returned to his body, and I began to pass out of mine – and the Abbot also was, if you will, a smeared blur around all of us – I was able to communicate, not with the Abbot (though he may have overheard and cursed), but with Daveth.

'I can do this, but it risks both of us,' I said – though it is not said but rather felt and remembered at once, like a recollection of a sad decision reached last Tuesday. 'But if it fails, I can bring you into me – as a co-habitant.' I offered this because I should, but also because Daveth is a good man, and I – I am not always – and his voice would be a comfort if this failed, unless it failed worse still.

'Nonsense, Doctor – what would I do with rattling around in your cranium like a sermon half remembered after the Sabbath? If I cannot have my own body, then let no one else take it – and I will look for the resurrection when the body will be made anew. I know now that providence acted to take Samuel to Heaven, not to trap him in yon devil's web – and that for me is enough to know. Act as you must with my blessing, for God will dispose as He will.'

And so, I let the facilitator facilitate, but I spun the crooked wheel an extra turn and threw into the metaphorical aforesaid wheel, my best metaphorical spanner. I died.

* * *

And so, he did, which is why it is I – his brother – who write to you, and conclude this letter. Though I will deny all knowledge of this, if any come to look for him through me. If you ask me how I know all that transpired, even to my late brother's musings – well, I am not prepared to tell you, although if you wish to believe that there may be between brothers a special bond by which such things can be known, that is an explanation that I can commend to you. It has the advantages of being untestable, simple, and untrue, and thus resembles the majority of human thoughts.

I also cannot explain the absence from the Rector's house of my brother's body, nor that of the severed Hand. That is, I could, but I will not. You may hear an account from the village that a bulky man wearing clothes like those of my brother, though barely fitting, and riding a horse that resembled his in every conceivable respect, galloped away after dropping an iron-wrapped bundle into a disused well. Such oddities occur all the time. Witnesses are very unreliable in what they think they see. But if you can keep them from draining the well, please do so.

I do not intend to enter into any communication further about this or my brother. Although I wish you well, the continuation of friendships across such divisions is an awkward one at best. In the event of any difficulties arising which might require further contact, you may address anything further to my lawyers – Bruce, Brae, and Bute of Portland Place – provided you don't expect an early reply, as the business is in its infancy. In fact, definitely don't for a good while, as it might not exist yet.

Yours sincerely

Doctor (of law, and medicine) Medec (the other one).

1 It is uncertain exactly when the papers were written. However, while Doctor Unonius was publishing scientific and medical papers as late as 1856 – one of which was read by him before the Tregantick Literary and Scientific Society in the winter session of 1856 – the events here must date before Rector Daveth Malcolm's death in 1804. This means that the middle-aged actor cast for the television adaption was too old. Doctor Unonius would at this time have been in the first year or so of his practice, and in his middle twenties at most – Ed.

2 'The fear of death confounds' (or 'troubles').

3 The phrase doubtless refers to a trip to the continent, and Doctor Medec's use of a term that can be applied to fairyland or the home of the sidhe, is merely an example of his dry humour – Ed.

4 Here a word scratched out with a sharp implement is illegible, and the word 'disease' has been substituted as a second thought.

5 Goethe's drama *Faust* was published in two parts, the first in 1808; this would appear to disagree with the date of Rector Daveth Malcolm's death, which is recorded in the parish as 1804 – Ed.

THE HOUNDS OF WAR

by Kenton Hall

‘Have you any idea, Doctor,’ Captain Abbot seethed, ‘quite how many lives are at stake here?’

I held my breath. There was clearly no answer that would satisfy the man. He was simply making a point, the last form of attack left to him. As perilous as our position was, I couldn’t help but feel for him. He had been soundly beaten by a foe he couldn’t begin to understand; his desire for vengeance was natural and his choice of the Doctor as its proxy inevitable.

There were dark circles around the soldier’s eyes and his voice had been reduced to a sandpaper rasp. His pistol rattled dangerously at the end of his outstretched arm.

‘I asked you a question, man.’

The Doctor met the Captain’s eyes and said, with an infuriating degree of calm:

‘About 338,000. Or thereabouts.’

* * *

Several days earlier, I had arrived at the offices of Bruce, Brae and Bute to find, much to my surprise, the Doctor hovering at my desk, in a state of either agitation or extreme excitement. I suspect he would have found it no less difficult than I, in that moment, to differentiate between the two.

‘Miss Weston!’ he bellowed, as I crossed the threshold. ‘You’re late!’

I was, in fact, thirty minutes early and told him so. He waved a hand dismissively, as if this was the sort of feeble excuse that a latecomer might be expected to employ. Further argument on my part seemed pointless; I began to unbutton my coat.

‘But,’ he said, in what I assume he meant to be a conciliatory tone, ‘let us say no more about it. We have work to do and time is of the essence.’ This last phrase seemed oddly emphasised, as though it had taken a great deal of effort to say it with a straight face.

‘Doctor,’ I began, intending to ask him, regardless of his stated preferences on the matter, to start at the beginning.

It was then that I noticed his attire. This was not something of which I had lately made a habit; puzzling over his sartorial choices left very little room in a day to get anything else done. But this was something entirely new and I felt a brief chill run the length of my spine.

The Doctor was in uniform. British army uniform. Or that is to say, the battle dress of what appeared to be a Major in the Royal Army Medical Corps. His shoulder-length hair remained, albeit heavily Brylcreemed back across his scalp and tucked tightly behind his ears. He very nearly looked the part, but there was

something so deeply unsettling about it that I'm afraid I let out a small gasp.

My employer blinked at me, obviously trying to identify the source of my distress. He followed my gaze to his uniform and gave a short, mirthless laugh.

'Yes, well,' he said. 'It wouldn't be my first choice either. But still a Doctor, at least.'

'Impersonating an officer is a serious offence,' I said, regretting the words even as they left my mouth. If there was one thing most likely to set the Doctor off it was any statement that he perceived to demonstrate a lack of imagination.

'You needn't fear,' the Doctor said. 'Your government has seen fit to award me a field commission. An exceedingly temporary one, I hasten to add.'

'Whatever for? And why wasn't I informed?'

'Your good Aunt suggested that would be your first reaction. I'm sure she'd apologise, if she were inclined towards that sort of thing, but I'm afraid it simply wasn't possible. Nonetheless, I shall need you at your most diligent for what lies ahead.'

I understand now why you chose the direct approach, Auntie, but I'll admit to a certain resentment at the time. I have chosen to remain in this post, but I like to think of myself as more than simply the Doctor's lackey.

'And what is that exactly?'

The Doctor gave the briefest of smiles.

'I'm afraid I have no idea.'

I inclined my head, less in agreement than in resignation.

'Very well,' I said. 'I assume we have a destination, at least.'

'*Mais oui.*'

* * *

Working for the Doctor has its fair share of frustrations: fleeting enthusiasms, unpredictable moods, the endless array of utterly preposterous tales that are, nonetheless, increasingly difficult to write off as pure fictions. Perhaps the most galling, however, is the seemingly bottomless supply of resources that my employer appears to command. No doubt a boon when it comes to the observations he undertakes on behalf of his mysterious benefactors, but with a war on, to see a single person move through the world with such ease occasionally sets my teeth on edge.

In this instance, at least, he appeared – despite his protestations to the contrary – to be employing them on behalf of the war effort, or at least in a manner sanctioned by the War Office. Perhaps selfishly, I enjoyed the feeling of actively serving. On the other hand, for the Doctor to become so directly involved meant that whatever we were heading to face, it fell under the conveniently broad umbrella of 'outside forces' and would therefore involve that potent mixture of intrigue and ambiguity in which he specialised.

He started as he meant to go on.

'Thank you, Thomas,' the Doctor was saying, doling out an alarming number of pound notes from his inside pocket and placing them in the increasingly grateful hand of the dockworker who had met us at the end of the darkened pier. 'I take it

my equipment has been installed aboard, as I requested.'

We had made our way to Brighton by car. The pier itself had been closed due to the war, a section of decking removed to prevent enemy access by sea. By some arrangement of the Doctor's, however, a temporary covering had been set in place, allowing us to reach our vessel – a small two-person runabout that appeared barely seaworthy.

'Aye,' said Thomas. 'Though it's made you a bit front-heavy. I'd avoid swells if it's within your power.'

'I shall do my best. You have my sincere thanks.'

Thomas glanced down at the thick wad of notes in his large, muscular hand and grinned.

'You're always welcome, Doctor. Safe travels.'

The Doctor nodded and turned back to me. I had been eyeing the boat with some apprehension. I had no particular qualms about a sea journey, but as Thomas said, the heavy, tarpaulined bulk that had been strapped across the ship's bow did suggest imminent capsizing.

'Come along, Miss Weston. Many miles to go before we sleep.'

* * *

I think it must be a function of age that peril viewed in hindsight is the source of greater fear than that occasioned in the eye of the storm itself. As we made our way across the Channel, sliding near noiselessly between inky blue shadows, my mind was too occupied by questions to take sufficient note of the immediate dangers. We were headed to France, thrusting ourselves into the heart of a retreat on a massive scale.

At the time, this is what I knew to be true: the fighting was not going well. Germany had surprised everyone by mounting a Panzer attack via the heavily wooded Ardennes, thus undercutting the impressive French fortifications of the Maginot Line. And as was too often the case, unforeseen meant largely undefended and, too quickly, the combined forces of Britain, France and Belgium had found themselves with withdrawal as their only recourse.

The port of Dunkirk was accessible and, it was hoped, sufficiently defendable to allow for the evacuation of as many troops as possible. They would live to fight, and likely die, another day.

What I could not work out was how the Doctor figured into the equation. Part of me hoped that the German war machine was being aided by someone or something supernatural, which would give my employer the excuse he needed to redress the unfair advantage. Yet, I doubted it somehow. Hard as it was to stomach, the events of the last few weeks, from a military standpoint, were desperately ordinary.

So what was it? The Doctor running towards danger I could countenance, but for something as prosaic as a military operation? It wasn't in his nature. No, there was something he wasn't telling me. Something he was not yet willing or able to share.

I gave him a quick glance. He was standing at the wheel – not that he had

much choice, if he cared to see over his equipment – lost, one hoped, in thought rather than fact. I say we travelled *near* noiselessly, which was true. We kept conversation to a minimum and even the boat's motor – possibly due to some tinkering on its operator's part – had been reduced to a low hum. But this silence was, if not broken, gently fractured every few seconds by what sounded like a soft, distant bell, emanating from the mysterious equipment that sat bulkily on the ship's bow. Each time it sounded, the Doctor made an almost imperceptible adjustment to their course.

'Mines,' he said abruptly, as if sensing the unspoken question.

'Doctor,' I started.

He held a finger to his lips and shook his head.

We had been travelling for several hours now, taking what felt like a particularly circuitous route across the Channel. Even so, by my calculations, we must be nearing our destination – or what I presumed to be our destination.

Twenty minutes later, my faith in my own arithmetic was rewarded. And the lingering question as to the Doctor's interest in all of this was, at least in part, answered.

There in the darkness, an as yet distant shape, lay the beaches of Dunkirk. We were too far off to see much, not yet having reached the shallow waters that I knew must be troubling the War Office back home. But I could sense – in a preternatural manner that would have delighted the Doctor – the thousands of soldiers that had been driven here, in hope of rescue. More than that, it hit me for the first time what might happen if a miracle was not summoned. This could be the end. The Allied cause destroyed. England overrun by Nazi hordes. The life and the country I'd known and served, forever altered. Humbled in a way that the British character could surely not tolerate without descending into madness.

All of these thoughts, however dire, were rendered insignificant by what I *could* see and hear. The sound was, perhaps, the worst part. Howls in the distance, from every point of the horizon, staggered as if answering each other across the night. Anguished, guttural howls. Animal, rather than human, but like nothing I'd ever heard before.

And, once my ears had attuned themselves sufficiently to focus on a single eruption, I realised that each corresponded to a faint blue point of light, scattered across the beaches and moving at an alarming pace.

The Doctor allowed the motor to sputter to a halt.

'Well, Miss Weston,' he said, with outstretched arm. 'What do you think?'

His tone was that of an art professor who had just plonked a promising student in front of the Mona Lisa and was keen to gauge their reaction.

'What the hell is that, Doctor?'

A flicker of a smile danced across his face.

'Oh, Miss Weston,' he said solemnly, 'let's not get ahead of ourselves. We'd miss out on the most enjoyable part.'

'And what might that be?'

'Not knowing yet.'

* * *

Guided by the Doctor's mine detector, we charted east of the main beach and

navigated through the shallows until we found a convenient disembarkation point. Convenient being a relative term, this still required us to wade a dozen or so metres from the boat to shore, and we were damp and weary by the time we stumbled onto French soil.

Not that it seemed to bother the Doctor. One look at his face and you would have sworn you heard the ticks and clicks of intricate clockwork at play. Whatever we had seen on the beaches had crystallised some private theory and now he was aching to put whatever reckless plan he'd concocted into motion.

The Doctor held a hard line against interfering with what he often called the 'ebb and flow of history,' but I'm sure he realised how much his frustration at this restriction showed. He drew the line at breaking his cardinal rule, but he rushed with alacrity towards any chance to bend it.

Something distinctly otherworldly was at play here, which meant the Doctor's scruples were moot. He had not only license but a responsibility to investigate.

He was, in other words, enjoying himself immensely.

'Just over this next rise, Miss Weston,' he called out, increasing his stride. 'It's time we introduced ourselves.'

* * *

We found the Captain in the nearest tent, the receiver of a field telephone placed to his ear and his face flushed with anger.

'I've told you,' he barked, 'We're barely holding on as it is.'

Whatever reply he received, it did nothing for the Captain's mood. I turned to the Doctor; his eyes were scanning the interior of the tent, as if committing every memory to detail. A mixture of keen interest and extreme boredom – if past experience was anything to go by.

'I don't give a damn about other units. I'm trying to keep these men safe long enough for you to decide how the hell you're going to get them home. And I can't do that without...'

The other end of the conversation had clearly moved to match his fury.

'You can tell that to their widows and their orphans,' bellowed Abbot and slammed the receiver down. For the moment, he rested his fists on the rickety card table that served as his desk and breathed out heavily. Then he looked up and acknowledged us for the first time.

It was not a welcoming look. If the Doctor's superior rank caught his attention, it didn't show. His eyes flicked over to the guard.

'Care to explain, Private?'

The guard cleared his throat.

'This is Major...'

'Doctor,' corrected my employer.

'And his adjutant, Miss Weston.'

The Captain gave a half-hearted salute. It was clear the poor man had exhausted his patience for formality.

'How I can help you, Major?'

'Doctor, please.'

Captain Abbot nodded.

'Well, at least you'll be of some use, in that case. Most of my men ought to be in a hospital bed. Instead, they're still at their posts, waiting on a miracle.'

'I understand that the War Office have a plan,' offered the Doctor, allowing his Scottish lilt to render the words as comradely as his assumed rank allowed.

'The War Office always have a plan,' countered Abbot bitterly. 'And I've no doubt they've the best of intentions. Out with Chamberlain, in with Churchill. Fighting spirit all around.' His face darkened. 'They fought like demons at Arras and yet still the Germans come. We're being overwhelmed by men, from every regiment on the damned coast. For all we know, half of them aren't even ours. We don't have the resources to check credentials. And now...'

'Your already meagre food stocks are being destroyed.'

Captain Abbot straightened.

'How in the hell do you know that? I've only just reported it to headquarters.'

The Doctor stepped forward, closing the distance between the two men.

'Would you like to expend time discovering *how* I know, or would you like to hear what I intend to do about it?'

The Captain laughed sourly.

'What you intend to *do* about it? About *this*?'

'Ah,' said the Doctor, 'you're concerned that I'll think you've gone mad. When you tell me what you've seen. On the beaches. At night.'

Captain Abbot staggered as if struck, collapsing into the chair behind him.

'I have gone mad. We all have.'

The Doctor perched on the edge of the table, then turned back to me.

'Miss Weston, Private. If you could give the Captain and me a moment alone?'

I swallowed my impulse to argue and allowed the guard to take my arm.

* * *

'Sorry about that, miss.'

'No need to apologise. I'm quite used to it. The Doctor enjoys a mystery. If he can't find one, he'll create one.'

The soldier hoisted his weapon onto his shoulder and extended his hand.

'Jones, miss. Private Ken Jones.'

I shook it. Captain Abbot was right, this was no time for formalities. This was purgatory. Everyone here was prepared to keep fighting, and if Private Jones was representative, no one expected to get out alive.

'Weston... Miss Weston.' Apparently, my training hadn't eroded as steeply as my companion's.

The soldier nodded, a small smile suggesting he'd read my mind.

'Your commanding officer,' he said, jerking a thumb towards the tent. 'He doesn't strike me as Regular Army.'

I stifled a laugh.

'The Doctor is seldom, if ever, "regular".'

'Toff, is he?'

I thought about that for a moment. Was he? There were times when he gave off

a certain aristocratic air. He was certainly a man used to giving orders and having them followed, yet he had a rebellious streak a mile wide that he barely bothered to conceal.

No, not a toff. If he was a Lord, it was of his own manor. Wherever or whenever that might be.

'An... eccentric,' I offered. 'But very good at what he does.'

'Yes, well. I've known a lot of Scots like that. But damn fine soldiers all.'

Oh, the Doctor was not that, I thought. Not in the slightest.

I was struck again by the question of why we were here. To hear Captain Abbot tell it, the retreating forces were the victims of, at best, German raiders. At worst, traitors in the ranks, which was not unheard of, especially during such desperate days.

It was terrible, heart-breaking and begged for immediate action. But it was not the sort of thing in which the Doctor became involved. Too much like history, running in its natural, haphazard way. When I had thought our trip to be specifically about the retreat to Dunkirk, our involvement had seemed improbable. Reduced to a single set of circumstances, it was inconceivable.

Those lights on the shore, however. That seemed much more like the Doctor's territory. Some new weapon of the Germans'? Supernatural, perhaps, in origin? There had been a lot of talk about Hitler's obsession with the paranormal. Apparently, he had agents scouring the ancient world for items of power, that he could use to secure his precious Reich. Had he actually found something?

I felt a giddy sensation that had become familiar to me. I have seen, in the course of my work with the Doctor, many things that should have been beyond explanation. Were, I admitted, beyond my understanding, at least in full. But the more I glimpsed the other worlds that lay beyond our own, the more I wanted to know. That frightened me. And the greater the feeling of dread, the more my nature demanded that I run towards the source of my fears.

Which frightened me more.

A scream and a sizzle of electricity jolted me back to the camp and my soldier companion.

He was the one screaming.

Something had leapt from the shadows, in utter silence, and thrown him the ground. Now, though, it crackled with a hot, blue light and buzzed like a swarm of angry bees. I couldn't quite make out its shape, but it was the size of a large dog, a greyhound perhaps, though bulkier. Its aft legs, if they could be said to be legs, were planted firmly either side of Jones' thighs. Its forelegs were on his chest, crushing him to the ground.

Its jaws were at his throat.

'Doctor!' I yelled, leaping towards the animal. I thought perhaps that if I threw my entire weight against its flank, I might at least be able to dislodge it. Whether that would be in time to save Jones, I didn't know, but I had to try.

I didn't get with a foot of the creature.

The field of electricity around its body appeared to rear up, like a wave heading towards the shore, then slammed into my side, sending me flying. Training sent me into a roll, which no doubt saved my ribs, but I nonetheless landed in a clumsy heap by the entrance to the command tent, just as the Doctor and Captain Abbott came charging out.

‘Jones!’ the Captain bellowed, instinctively bolting towards his fallen man. The Doctor grasped his wrist hard and held him in place.

‘You won’t get near the thing!’ I called out. I noted, unhappily, that the screaming had stopped.

‘Damn it, man. Let me go!’ The Captain seemed almost frenzied in his attempts to escape, but the Doctor was stronger than he looked.

The creature lifted its head and turned towards us.

It was a nightmarish vision. Beneath the blue shield was the blackened corpse of an animal, pieces of charred flesh and hair still hanging in strips from the exposed bones.

No one moved but the Doctor. While the Captain and I shrunk back, he stepped forward in obvious fascination. He rummaged in his pocket and pulled out a small silver orb, which he casually tossed in the direction of the hell dog.

It hovered gently in the air, a few inches from the animal, then began to spin. The Doctor watched it eagerly, as though he was being shown a magic trick and was keen to discover the secret. The orb turned faster and faster, until it became a blur, before shooting off into the distance with a high, metallic ping.

Whatever its purpose, it seemed to have the requisite effect on the creature, which let out a horrible yowl from somewhere deep within its decomposing throat, before its energy field seemed to contract, first compressing the animal into a single point of blue light, before winking out of existence altogether.

‘Interesting,’ said the Doctor.

Captain Abbot was at the fallen Private’s side within seconds.

‘Jones! Can you hear me?’

‘Doctor,’ I nudged. He was staring at the point where the creature had been, his eyes narrowed in thought.

He looked up at me, then at the soldier and his commander, and nodded.

‘Captain,’ he said, ‘allow me.’ He strode over to the Private and knelt, gently pulling Abbot back so that he could make an examination.

It didn’t take long.

‘I’m sorry,’ said the Doctor, gently closing the man’s eyes, then turning away quickly to wipe the blood from his hands on a handkerchief concealed in his sleeve.

Abbot swallowed hard. He was straining to latch onto the last of his military bearing, something that could allow him to walk and talk, without the messy business of being alive.

‘Damn it,’ the commander muttered, a thousand other words hidden beneath. ‘God damn it.’

Then he rounded on the Doctor.

‘What the hell was that?’

‘I’m not entirely sure.’

But the Captain had stumbled forward and thrust a finger into the Doctor’s chest. The other, I noted, was reaching for the pistol holstered at his waist.

‘Is that so? Well, from what I saw it’s something to do with you. You certainly seemed to know what to do about it. With your little... whatever the hell that was.’

The Doctor gently reached up, grasped the Captain’s finger and pushed him backwards several steps.

‘Captain,’ he said sternly. ‘I appreciate that you are overwrought, and with good reason. And I am certainly sorry for your loss. No one knows better than I that in the face of constant death, it is the individual blows that strike the hardest. However, you have a very severe problem here. And it pains me to tell you that it is not the one you think it is.’

Then he turned to me.

‘Miss Weston, remind me. What is today’s date?’

‘You don’t know the date?’ the Captain exploded. ‘What in God’s name…’

‘Miss Weston, please.’

‘May 23rd.’

The Doctor nodded.

‘Spring is no season for death. Now, please, Captain Abbott. Tell me everything that has been happening here. Leave nothing out.’

* * *

The Captain led us to a rise, overlooking the massed forces on the beaches of Dunkirk. Thousands upon thousands of men, with their backs to the North Sea. Behind us, in the distance, forming a loose semicircle, we could just make out the same points of lights we had seen from the sea.

The creature we’d seen was not alone.

‘How long has this been going on, Captain?’ asked the Doctor.

‘A week,’ Abbot said, ‘Perhaps more. We lost communication with our forces in the South, shortly after the Germans began to move up the Somme Valley. Dunkirk was the only viable port with any possibility of rescue. So, everyone came here. It wasn’t safe – the tanks will reach us eventually, and we’ve the Luftwaffe to consider – but there was hope.’

‘Until these creatures arrived,’ I said.

‘I think they were here before us. By time we got here and managed to set up some sort of camp, food was already running low and there were rumours of men dying in the night. It’s difficult to keep track here. Sometimes men just disappear.’

‘Tonight was the first time you’d seen them up close?’

‘I had assumed it was some sort of weapon. The Germans have taken Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Belgium like they were out for a casual stroll. They have superior air power, they have their damned Panzer tanks. Who knows what else the devils have cooked up?’

The Doctor stroked his chin.

‘This may be difficult to believe, but this is not the work of your German foes.’

‘Not the Italians!’

‘No. These creatures come from rather further afield.’

‘Doctor,’ I began to warn him.

He held up a hand.

‘Miss Weston. I know what you’re about to say and it does not apply. This is no time for spycraft.’

Abbot growled.

‘So it’s espionage, is it? I thought as much.’

‘Well, after a fashion. I’ve been picking up signals for some time, back in England, and became concerned that those responsible might have a testing ground in mind. I’ll admit, until recently, I did not believe they would act on such a scale. Still, in some ways, it makes our job that little bit easier.’

‘Our job?’

‘We must, my dear Captain Abbot, fight them on the beaches.’

* * *

If I live to be 100, I will never forget the long walk amongst the gathered Allied forces. They all looked so young. Both terrified and determined, in that way particular to young men, not to show it. Instead, they gathered in groups, laughing and smoking, talking about those they’d left at home.

Those closest to us instinctively snapped into attention as the Captain and the Doctor – in his Major’s uniform – appeared but it was clear it took all of their remaining energy to do so. Their upper lips were stiff, but their bellies were tight and their wounds fresh.

I caught Captain Abbot glance in my direction once or twice, clearly looking for some reassurance that my employer knew what he was doing. It wasn’t my place to give that reassurance, and, to be fair, I wasn’t sure it would be honest of me to do so. The Doctor was a person who was most often right after the fact. Until that point, it wasn’t always clear how far ahead he planned. At times, it felt like he was centuries ahead of the rest of us; at others, mere seconds.

In this case, having seemingly worked out the problem and what he needed to do about it, the Doctor had, somewhat callously I felt, dismissed the idea of waiting to bury Private Jones and had insisted that we make our way immediately to our runabout. We waited on the shore as the Doctor waded out to the boat, uncovered what I had come to think of his mine detector, produced a small hammer from within his uniform pocket and, more to the Captain’s astonishment than mine, began to strike the device with it. After a short time, he had detached a large metal cylinder which, until now, had sat atop the larger machine. This he held up in triumph and slowly made his way back to the shore.

‘Now, Captain,’ he said, ‘let’s see what we can do about these hounds of yours, shall we?’

Having now reached the beach, the Doctor stopped in his tracks. Then he dug one heel into the ground and turned in a small semi-circle, one finger raised against what little wind there was. Appearing to find weather conditions to his satisfaction, he kicked a small groove into the earth and placed the metal cylinder into it.

He then produced a handful of the small metal orbs from his pocket – a dozen or more – and, opening the top of the cylinder, let them fall into it, clanking against each other like marbles.

The Captain looked on with a sense of impatient incomprehension.

‘And this will work, will it?’ he asked. ‘This will drive these creatures away from the beaches?’

The Doctor looked over at him and I caught a dangerous flicker in his eyes.

‘Trust me, Captain,’ he said. ‘You won’t have to worry about them ever again.’

I’d been working for you, Auntie, too long not to hear the doublespeak in the Doctor’s answer, but Captain Abbot seemed not to notice. He just wanted something done. And if that mean pouring electric space marbles into mechanical cylinders, so be it.

‘Step back now,’ said the Doctor – a fraction late, because the cylinder was already beginning to rise into the air, already beginning to spin as the single orb had done. But the power produced by the collection of orbs was obviously exponential. It spun at such a speed that it appeared to be standing still. Bright green light began to pour through its crevices. Indeed, the metal began to buckle and crack, allowing further beams to spill out. It rose higher, the light illuminating the crowds of soldiers below like a fireworks display.

And then we heard the howls.

‘It’s working,’ shouted Captain Abbot. ‘Whatever it is you’re doing to them, it’s working. They can’t stand it, the bastards.’

I looked across the horizon. The hounds’ blue lights were no longer roaming to and fro across the French countryside. But they had not stopped moving.

‘Doctor?’

‘Yes, Miss Weston.’

‘Are they meant to be getting closer?’

‘Fascinating,’ replied the Doctor.

‘That is not an answer to the question I asked you, Doctor,’ I said, ‘and we’ve spoken about that.’

‘Patience, Miss Weston,’ my employer chided. ‘You must have patience.’

Patient or not, the hounds were on the march. And far from fleeing the extraordinary light show the Doctor had provided, they appeared to be drawn to it, like moths to a flame.

Within moments, they had become, not far off lights, but living, churning creatures encircling the retreating soldiers. The crackling and buzzing of their energy fields filled the air, growing in volume and ferocity.

Screams went up as one of the animals set upon the first group of soldiers they found. Shots were fired, but from the curses that followed, to no avail.

I could make out the shapes of ten or more of them on the rise on which we had previously stood. They howled in unison, a call that was taken up by their compatriots on and around the beach.

And then there was a click of a revolver being cocked.

‘Doctor!’ I yelled.

The Doctor turned to find Abbot, his eyes dark with panic and grief, holding his gun at the end of a trembling arm.

‘I should have seen it,’ he said, ‘I’m so tired. I should have seen it. You are spies, but not for us. You’ve forced us to the beaches to destroy us. Savaged by your hellhounds.’

‘Abbot, be reasonable. You’re getting quite the wrong end of the stick.’

‘Have you any idea, Doctor,’ Captain Abbot seethed, ‘quite how many lives are at stake here?’

The Doctor ignored the question, focussing his attention instead on the revolving cylinder high above our heads. It was beginning to spin more erratically, its beams flashing on and off.

I, on the other hand, was trying not to think about the skeletal animals that had descended the rise and were on all sides, marching in demonic formation towards us. Chaos had erupted on the beach, some fleeing for higher ground, others making a brave attempt to fight back.

'I asked you a question, man!' demanded Abbot.

'About 338,000. Or thereabouts,' replied the Doctor. Then he put two fingers in his mouth and gave a short, sharp whistle.

And Dunkirk exploded.

* * *

We spent much of the journey back in silence. The Doctor seemed more than usually contemplative; he hadn't even waited for Captain Abbot to regain consciousness and admit that he'd been right all along, which was very unlike him.

I had tried to get some sense out of him early on, but I still wasn't sure what to make of it.

'You knew the machine would draw the hounds in.'

'Of course. It was the only way to take care of such a large number of them at one time,' he said. 'And they weren't hounds, in the strictest sense. Scouts might be a better word.'

'For whom? The Germans?'

'No,' laughed the Doctor, 'not the Germans. Another people entirely. Who are rather difficult to describe. In brief, they come from a world where all creatures have intensely short lifespans. And like all thinking creatures, they have spent much of their existence attempting to correct that. They discovered that they could prolong their lives, if not their bodies, through constant exposure to a certain type of energy. Unfortunately, it is often in short supply. So, they go looking for it.'

'What sort of energy?'

The Doctor frowned. Which always made me feel as though he was trying to simplify calculus to a level that a slug might understand.

'In essence, they feed on positive emotions. Love, joy, excitement... hope. They travel the universe, siphoning it off in dribs and drabs. When they stumbled on the British retreat to Dunkirk, they must have imagined they'd found themselves a smorgasbord.'

'Why were they raiding the food supplies if they wanted to feed on positive emotions?'

'Because, I assume, they quickly discovered one of the many peculiarities about the human race. Contentment is a bland meal. Hope, on the other hand, is sharpened by adversity. They were simply behaving like connoisseurs.'

I shook my head.

'And you – what – destroyed them?'

'I hope I've set them through a dimensional rift, to somewhere where their needs can be met, more synthetically.'

I realised that I stopped understanding the conversation I was having several

exchanges previously and gazed out over the water.

We sat in silence for several minutes before the Doctor spoke again:

'You are worried about the men at Dunkirk.'

'Of course. I can't help but feel the Germans will reach them before they can be evacuated.'

'It does seem likely,' said the Doctor, unfastening his uniform jacket. It was beginning to itch. 'On the other hand, one wonders what any passing Luftwaffe pilots will have made of the extraordinary explosion that just took place over their enemies' encampments. They might be tempted to believe, as Captain Abbot did, that a new weapon had been brought to the field.'

'You think they'll retreat?'

'Perhaps not retreat. But I wouldn't be at all surprised if the advance was halted for just long enough to get the men from the beaches and safely home to, alas, fight another day.'

I looked at him suspiciously.

'You wouldn't be surprised, or you know?'

'Miss Weston,' he said, with a sorrowful shake of his head, 'I've told you before. There is no fun in knowing.'

RETROGENESIS, Part 2

by Philip Purser-Hallard

Excerpt from *Night of the Angel*

'The Kelda Stone,' the Doctor whispered to me. 'Just as I remember it.'

It was large, for a standing stone, and of an unusual kind of marble-like rock, with veins of gold and black. It was intricately carved with a design that drew the eye compellingly and strangely, in arcs and whorls. It stood on a plinth, above a printed plaque that read *Prehistoric megalith – Kellerston, Kerwinshire*.

Had the museum been darkened, as of course it should have been during the present blackout, I would have been unable to see either carvings or printing. But then I doubted that the flaming torches were a part of the usual display, any more than the trestle table draped in cloth-of-gold to form a makeshift altar on which a crucible bubbled and steamed, or the two identical red-robed figures who stood, eerily still, flanking the stone on either side.

From behind the darkened corner where we were hiding, behind a set of medieval stocks that had been unceremoniously shoved aside, the Doctor and I peered out at this uncanny scene.

'Kellerston,' I murmured. 'Wasn't that the village that was devastated when that stray German bomber crashed into it?'

'Indeed it was,' the Doctor agreed gruffly. 'Shortly after the British Museum acquired this exhibit, as I recall.'

'All those poor people,' I remembered with a shudder.

'There's no need to whisper, Miss Weston,' called a voice. My skin crept, as I recognised its insinuating tones. 'Please, both of you, do step into the light. An occasion such as this simply wouldn't be the same without you. Raise your hands if you'd like to join in.'

The Doctor and I looked at each other, but it was clear that the game was up. Scowling, the Doctor lifted his arms as requested, and stepped out gingerly into the room. Gritting my teeth, I followed.

Another robed figure strolled out from behind the figurehead of a Viking longboat, a gun held casually in his hand. His hood was down, unlike those of his acolytes, and I felt my stomach squirm to recognise him.

'This is madness, you know,' the Doctor growled. 'The Kelda is a being of light. It will never deal with the likes of you.'

'Oh, you underestimate its pliability, Doctor,' the Magus said, in that smooth voice of his. 'I have had dealings with the Kelda before, in service of the Unity.' His youthful face was unnaturally handsome still, despite the livid scar it had acquired during our encounter at the Londinium Mithraeum, and his dark eyes burned with malevolent fire.

'Impossible,' the Doctor snapped. 'It's been in hibernation for millennia. Even I could only partially awaken it.'

'Oh, not this Kelda,' the Magus replied easily. 'One of its fellows. I found it

amenable to persuasion, eventually.'

I saw the Doctor's expression change. He tried quickly to conceal it, but the Magus had detected his surprise.

'You didn't know?' he asked mockingly. 'Oh, there are many Kelda, Doctor. This is but one of the species. There will be plenty left once my business of the night is done.'

THE ROSEWELL INCIDENT

by Matthew Kresal

The chance to escape to the country at mid-week is always a welcomed thing, as you well know, Auntie. Doubly so now that Hitler was throwing his buzz bombs at London. Five years after the march into Poland, there are somehow still new weapons and new surprises in store. If there hadn't been, I wouldn't be out in the country with him.

'That's quite the wistful sigh, Miss Weston,' the Doctor said suddenly. He had uttered not a word since we'd left London, and my surprise was palpable. I turned to see his head still facing out the train window, a knowing smile on his face.

'Merely enjoying the countryside,' I admitted. The Doctor let out a sigh of his own. I knew what he was about to say.

'I'd have rather we took *my* way to get to our destination, you know?'

I did know. But, as I reminded the Doctor, the last time we had attempted to use it, we had ended up on a misadventure like something out of Verne or Wells. Even so, the Doctor was still smarting from your telling him he couldn't use it to travel when you called upon us.

'That's as may be,' he burred with that Scottish accent of his, 'but I don't appreciate spending so much time on a trifling matter. Why your employer couldn't send someone else, I can't imagine.'

'Auntie did say it was unusual, remember?' The Doctor was in one of his moods, I could tell. Still, there was nothing for it but to bear through it. That, and hope that he would liven up at our destination.

When the train arrived at the station, we were not only the sole passengers who got off, but we also found ourselves expected by an RAF officer. One sees so many men in uniform these days that it's easy to take them for granted. Seeing this chap, tall and handsome even as he was closer to the Doctor's apparent age than my own, it was hard not to be struck by him.

'You must be the chap from the Ministry?' he inquired of us as we walked up. I must admit I was less taken with him at that point, though such things were a disappointment that came with traveling alongside the Doctor.

'We're the *people* from the Ministry, yes.' The Doctor corrected before putting out an arm to introduce me. Our host tipped his cap toward me, an apologetic look on his face.

'Forgive me, miss. I didn't realise you were with him. Do you have your identification documents?'

I handed them over, having kept them on the journey. The Doctor, for all of his pockets with their seemingly bottomless depths, was constantly losing things. After a few moments, I received them back.

'Very well,' the RAF officer said, satisfied. 'I'm Group Captain Eoin Bilke. Shall we get on our way?'

* * *

‘So what is this wreckage that you had the Ministry bring us out here to see?’ We were scarcely down the road from the train station when the Doctor asked the question, leaning toward the front seat of the Land Rover. Bilke was in the front passenger seat while I sat behind the driver, a younger enlisted man.

‘One of the locals found it, as it happens. A shepherd named Auten was trying to graze his herd, but they wouldn’t cooperate. He started looking around, and that was when he started finding a lot of material.’

‘You mean like plane wreckage?’ I asked, assuming that was why we were here. After all, it wasn’t unusual for the Germans to target RAF bases a few summers ago. To my surprise, Bilke shook his head.

‘Auten saw German stuff when they were targeting the base here back in ’40. What he found was entirely different to any of that.’

Bilke paused, shifting in his seat. It took me a moment to realise that he was reaching into a pocket on his uniform jacket, from which he extracted a white handkerchief. He held it out, letting the Doctor take it from him.

‘That was one small piece that Auten brought to us. Easiest one to show you while we were en route. Go ahead and take a look at it.’

Without saying a word, the Doctor set about the methodical procedure of unfolding the cloth. At last, there was a piece of what looked like foil from a pack of cigarettes sitting there on the Doctor’s palm, an unimpressive object. Seeing the disappointment and frustration on his face, I thought it best to speak up before he did.

‘Did you pick up the wrong item, Group Captain?’

I heard Bilke emit a chuckle from his seat. ‘You might well think that, for I know I did. Try bending it. It shouldn’t be too difficult, yes?’

I looked to the Doctor, who gave me an affirming nod. I reached out my hand to pick it up, feeling the metal coolness against my fingers. My first thought was to wad it up, and I made a fist, feeling it crumple up as I closed my digits around it.

‘Now open your hand,’ Bilke said. I did as he asked with no particular expectation. I looked down at my unfolding fist and felt my heart skip a beat. As my fingers moved out, so too did the foil-like metal. What had been a ball was a flat piece again in a matter of seconds.

‘Intriguing!’ The Doctor exclaimed, swiping it out of my hand. I could only watch open-mouthed as he repeated my experiment not once but twice, a look of delight on his face. For the first time since we’d set to come north, I saw a smile cross his face.

‘If you like that,’ Bilke announced with satisfaction, ‘wait until you see what we’ve got sitting in one of the hangars.’

It took a half-hour and going through the security that surrounded RAF Rosewell at this point in the war before we arrived at the place in question. From the outside, the building was another in a line of unassuming hangars. Even the placement of two armed guards on sentry duty wouldn’t have been out of place at any of the countless bases across the country.

It took the approach of Group Captain Bilke, with myself and the Doctor in tow,

his pale brown overcoat trailing behind him in the afternoon breeze, for things to begin to change. One of the guards slung his rifle over his shoulder, turning to give a hollow knock against the hangar door. After a moment of waiting, the door slid open, wide enough only for a single person to enter. What lay inside was not meant to be seen by anyone else.

I was the last to pass inside, following in the wake of Bilke and the Doctor. To my surprise, both had stopped shortly after entering, nearly blocking my path. It took my walking around the Doctor, seeing what he had seen, to understand why even he was surprised.

The hangar was a hive of activity, despite its outwardly calm appearance. Before me, more than a dozen men in uniform were carrying pieces of debris around. The items ranged from the size of a fist to that of a travel trunk, with the men moving them about, assembling them as if it was all some ragged jigsaw puzzle. Around the edges of the hangar were other pieces, scattered about and awaiting their turn. In the middle were not one but two different larger objects, the first resembling a metal box, the other looking as if someone had torn a pie tin before attempting to put it back together again.

'Whatever it was, was fairly sizable,' Bilke explained to an open-mouthed Doctor and me. 'It's hard to believe the Germans could have cooked up something like this.'

'I think you'll find that this thing comes from farther afield than that,' the Doctor replied. Bilke turned to him, clearly curious, but the Doctor paid him little heed, walking toward some of the wreckage. Instead, the Group Captain turned to me.

'What does he mean by that? Surely he doesn't mean the Soviets or the Japanese?'

'Not at all,' I answered. I wanted to recount some of the happenings I'd seen in the last few years, from waxworks coming alive to our dealings with a handsome Commander in Naval Intelligence and the codebreakers at Bletchley. None of which the Group Captain had what you'd call a 'need to know,' so I kept my mouth shut. At least until I came up with something else to tell him. 'We're used to dealing with the unusual.'

'I see,' Bilke replied, even though it seemed logical that he most definitely did not. Bilke leaned toward me, inquiring in a hushed tone, 'The Yanks, then?'

'Miss Weston?' The Doctor called for me before I had to give the Group Captain an answer. I left him behind, quickly moving over and crouching down next to my employer, taking care so my plaid skirt would not catch on anything.

'What do you make of this?' he asked, holding a piece of the debris in each hand. Being on his left, I took the one from that hand first. It was more of the foil-like metal we'd seen on the ride over, except more sizable and stiff. It took both hands to bend it even a little way, just for it to pop back into place again. I said as much and sat the piece down, causing the Doctor to lift his right hand.

'And this?'

I had expected this to be more of the same, but the third time was not the charm in this case. The Doctor had given me something that looked to be made of some thick substance but was, in fact, lightweight. So much so that, as I held it, it folded over my hand, dangling like linen on a clothesline. Whatever this was, it wasn't the same material at all. I turned to the Doctor, but the smile and raised

eyebrow told me he had already reached the same conclusion.

'What is it?' I asked him. The Doctor looked toward the centre of the hangar, concentrating on the two very different objects sitting there. He looked back at me, adjusting his hat as he stood up.

'Something that has no business being here, I'd imagine.' Before I could ask what he meant by that, he was moving back toward Bilke. 'Tell me, Group Captain, was there a storm in the last few days? Perhaps a few miles off-shore?'

'There was,' Bilke replied with some surprise at the question. 'So much so that I nearly lost one of my boys and his fighter to it. Why do you ask?'

'Because I think that's what brought this thing down.'

'That thing?' Bilke scoffed, looking at the size of it. 'What the devil even is it?'

'That,' I said as I walked back over, 'is what I've been trying to find out for myself. Doctor, you said –'

'Oh, I know what I said.' The Doctor cut me off, raising a finger as he did so. Again, he turned from me toward Bilke. 'Have you spotted any unusual radar contacts in the last few days? Specifically, since Auten brought you the debris?'

Bilke's mouth fell open, quite literally. The Doctor offered one of his cryptically beneficent smiles. The Group Captain, no doubt tired of asking how he knew things, closed his mouth and let out a long sigh.

'The last two nights, we've had radar contacts. Both were approaching from the northeast, which is unusual for the Germans. I sent up fighters to intercept, but they disappeared before they got close to them. In case they tried landing someone, I've doubled the guards here.'

The Doctor took in Bilke's words. He said nothing, the smile gone, his head nodding almost imperceptibly as he listened. The wheels were turning in his mind, for I knew the fire burning in those blue eyes. He was about to ask the impossible and somehow get it.

'Group Captain Bilke, I need you to stand down your men this evening.' Bilke began to protest, but the Doctor wouldn't let him get a word in. 'When the radar contact is detected this evening, you will not scramble any fighters. I want *all* guards removed from this hangar. Is that clear?'

Bilke had his chance, and he took it. 'Are you mad? You walk in here, as an expert, and start issuing orders? You want me to leave a potential Nazi superweapon unguarded?'

'Not at all, to answer all your questions at once.' The Doctor beamed a smile. 'But I'll answer them individually, too. First, if you need proof of my sanity, I'm sure Miss Weston could give you a number in Whitehall to call. Secondly, I am merely making a suggestion that could save the lives of everyone on this base. And lastly, I intend for myself and Miss Weston to stay here and keep guard. You're welcome to join us if you'd like?'

'Well,' Bilke sputtered, 'when you put it like that...'

'I do. And if you need to get authorisation, 'the same phone number from Miss Weston should supply it. I'm also going to need a spare radio set to be brought here to the hangar. I've only got a few hours to get it ready for this evening.'

* * *

It was a busy afternoon at RAF Rosewell. Bilke had his men fall back from their typical defensive positions, take all of their weapons indoors and be ready to spring into action at a moment's notice. I dare say that your authorisation, Auntie, helped set his mind at ease about what the Doctor had asked of him. Even the famed Spitfires were moved into their hangars.

Despite all of these activities, I found myself with little to do. I didn't know enough about the RAF's procedures to assist Bilke's men. The Doctor, hunched over in the office scarcely the size of a cupboard built into one corner of the hangar, was in a chair fiddling with the radio Bilke had got for him. I tried asking about the modifications, but the Doctor hoed and hummed at me. I'm not sure why I expected anything different, given all our time together. Eventually, I let him be and spent my time wandering around the debris strewn about the hangar. It was disconcerting to look at it all. Trying to make sense of all the pieces and how they might have fit together was an unsettling experience, not only how anyone could have built but likewise piloted the craft.

'Pilots,' I said to myself at one point. With my simply saying the word aloud, stray thoughts connected themselves. I felt my heart pick up its beat, and I turned to look around the hangar. Not seeing what I was looking for, I marched myself over to the office where the Doctor had the radio apart.

'Pilots,' I repeated for his benefit. 'If this thing was an aircraft or something, where are its pilots? There are no bodies out in the hangar.'

'Bravo!' The Doctor smiled, tilting his head back to look up at me. Of course, he'd thought of that before now. He always did.

'Well, where are they?' I asked.

The Doctor shrugged, turning back to his work on the radio. 'There are two possibilities, as I see it. The first is that the pilots, as you called them, bailed out and are even now either tramping across northern Britain or lying dead.'

'And the other?'

The Doctor paused in his work. He looked up at me, raising an eyebrow. 'The other is that it didn't have any pilots at all.'

'You're joshing,' I blurted out without further thought. 'Something like that could just fly itself?'

'Or was set going in our direction. You know as well as I do that remote-controlled weapons are already operational. Perhaps someone steered it from a long way away.'

'Like Germany or Japan?' I asked. The Doctor's eyebrow somehow managed to go up even further. I wanted to ask his meaning, but the door creaked open suddenly as Bilke entered.

'We've got the radar contact again!'

'Splendid!' The Doctor turned back to the radio, picking up the remaining pieces. 'Shut the door behind you, Group Captain. I need to finish reassembling this, and then we can greet our new arrivals.'

'You don't mean –' Bilke started to say, but the Doctor raised a silencing hand. We watched him go about his work, hurriedly but expertly reassembling the radio. We sat in silence, only the electronic hum of the radio and the sound of our breathing filling the air for what felt like an eternity but was, I later discovered, less than half an hour.

Our wait ended with the now-familiar sound of the hangar door rolling open. In

the gloom of the closet with its single bulb, I saw Bilke's face fill with alarm. His grey eyes widened, and he reached for the pistol strapped at his waist. The Doctor gripped the Group Captain's wrist, further alarming him.

'Shooting won't solve anything,' the Doctor hissed. 'Let me talk to them first.'

Bilke was evidently about to ask the obvious question, but the Doctor shook his head. He looked over to me, nodding toward the radio. I mouthed a 'Really?' to him in surprise, but the Doctor was already getting to his feet. How a man dressed like a civil servant, and in those shoes, could move as quietly as he did, I'll never know.

'Come along!' The Doctor whispered. 'Let's greet them.'

With the heavy radio now in my hands, I looked at an uncertain Bilke. He still had his hand at his holster, but it seemed that he was choosing to trust the Doctor for the moment. We had no other choice, really, as the Doctor opened the door. He paused for a moment before, with a smile on his face, he stepped into the hangar, with we two in tow.

Bilke and I froze almost as soon as we were out the door. There, two or three yards away at most, stood two figures. If Bilke had thought they'd be Germans, as I must confess I half-expected them to be, we were sorely mistaken. If it wasn't for how thin they were, even in their arms and legs, I might have thought they were children. But their grey skin and large heads dissuaded me of that notion. They moved their arms and hands with three fingers in a graceful yet unsettling way that made me think both of when I took ballet and of the stick-figure insects I'd seen as a child.

'Good evening!' The Doctor's words echoed off the hangar's metal walls, causing both Bike and me to recoil, cringing. The grey figures turned in the same instant, revealing smooth faces dominated by teardrop-shaped black eyes. Slits opened toward the bottom of them, revealing toothless mouths that broadcast a gasping sound.

'Don't be afraid!' The Doctor continued, holding up his arms. 'I merely want to talk to you.'

'It cannot understand us.' A rasping, androgynous voice came out of the radio. I took my gaze away from the beings to look at the hefty device in my hands in utter surprise.

'Doctor, is that them?' I asked. The Doctor nodded, keeping his blue eyes on the pair in front of us.

'I added a translation crystal to the set. I thought it might come in handy once I realised where all of this *didn't* come from.'

'Well, what the hell are they?' Bilke gasped, taking a step forward. The Doctor put out his left arm, not letting the Group Captain get any closer. Watching as the short grey creatures took a step back of their own, I wasn't surprised.

'We mean you no harm,' the Doctor reminded them. 'The Group Captain here is worried about not only his safety but that of his men and country. I am sure that you understand that?'

The creatures titled their heads in opposite directions, like curious dogs. One of them stretched out a hand toward the Doctor. 'How is it that you knew to expect us? Or have the knowledge to communicate? You are not of this planet.'

'Ah,' the Doctor chuckled. 'I could ask what you're doing here yourselves. After all, this isn't your home, either.'

‘And where is that, then?’ Bilke had become impatient by this point, perhaps understandably. He looked to the beings, pointing a finger toward them. ‘What are you, Martians? You’ve certainly got the bug eyes for them.’

‘No need to be rude, Group Captain!’ I said sharply. ‘You’d be surprised how often they look quite like you or me.’

‘My colleague is quite correct. Though I suspect our guests here would very much like us to believe they’re from somewhere,’ he paused to point a finger of his own toward the roof, ‘out there. Though the wreckage over there would indicate something incapable of traversing interstellar space.’

The Doctor has been careful to tell me not to assign human characteristics to non-human things. He calls it ‘anthropomorphism’, which is a good word, I think you’ll agree, Auntie. Even so, I swear I saw one of the creatures nod its sizable head.

‘That is often the thought,’ one of them replied through the radio. ‘The reality is more... prosaic.’

Bilke lowered his hand, confusion on his face. ‘What the devil does it mean by that? If it’s not from Mars, where else could it come from?’

The Doctor let out another of his chuckles, nodding his head. We watched as his outstretched left index finger went from pointing at the ceiling to slowly toward the floor. He finished his quiet laugh, licking his lips.

‘Or something close to that? There’s a reason why humans so often imagine hell and demons beneath their feet, am I right?’

‘We do not know enough to comment. Your surmise is not entirely incorrect.’

‘Look here,’ Bilke exploded, causing the creatures to recoil again. ‘Are you saying these things are underground? How long have they been here? And where are they from?’

‘We are from many places.’ One of them lowered one of its bony fingers toward the ground even as its other hand waved in a slow-motion from one side to the other. ‘We originate from the same place you do, and have been here since before your species, or the reptiles arose.’

The Doctor put his hands together, forming a pyramid with his fingers. ‘Just imagine it. A second genesis of intelligence evolving here on Earth, complete with a civilisation. Living almost entirely separately from humanity, only appearing through happenstance or the occasional peek through the veil.’

‘If that’s true,’ I interjected out of my own curiosity, ‘then why appear now?’

‘Something crashed by accident?’ Bilke chimed in, showing some signs of understanding. ‘The war, it’s got their attention.’

‘Well done, Group Captain.’ The Doctor smiled, putting a hand on Bilke’s nearest shoulder. ‘Though they’ve been keeping an eye on your lot for a long time before that.’

‘The current conflict has indeed accelerated our interest in your civilisation,’ came the reply through the radio. One of the creatures raised a hand, perhaps to indicate which of them was communicating, as their voices, if I can call them that, sounded identical over the radio.

‘This was one of your observation craft,’ the Doctor waved an outstretched hand toward the wreckage scattered around us. ‘Something like a balloon or airship. The storm brought it down, and you have been trying to recover it ever since?’

‘Correct observations.’ The other being raised a hand as the first lowered theirs. ‘We had hoped to recover it before it, and its technology, were put to incorrect uses.’

‘“Incorrect uses?”’ Bilke quoted back at the creature. The Doctor nodded in understanding.

‘It means as weapons in this war of yours,’ he explained. ‘I suspect that the impact of much of the world being in conflict, burning and dying even as we speak, has affected the ecology. So much so that they’ve felt a need to consider intervention.’

‘The genie being out of the bottle,’ I found myself saying. The Doctor turned to me, a soft smile on his face.

‘Put that thing down, Miss Weston. I rather think I’m going to need you to help me.’ He turned to the Group Captain, his smile becoming a beaming one. ‘Group Captain Bilke, you’re fortunate enough to be present at first contact between humanity and –’

A flash of orange light came through the hangar doors. I had just enough time to register it before a thundering boom followed in its wake. All of us in the hangar, even the Doctor and the creatures, bent down out of instinct. The sound of gunfire came through the hangar door, and I saw the look of horror on Bilke’s face.

‘It’s what I feared!’ He shouted, grabbing the Doctor’s left shoulder, turning him so that they were face to face. ‘You opened us up to an attack!’

‘They have come,’ a voice rasped through the radio. All three of us turned toward the beings, who, again trying to follow the Doctor’s advice here, I noticed were fidgeting like schoolboys afraid they were about to be caught out.

‘Who is coming?’ The Doctor asked, pulling away from Bilke and standing up. ‘Do the Germans know of you, too?’

‘*Ja*, we do,’ a new voice said through the hangar door.

Having put the radio down, I was free to stand up and look in that direction, gasping with surprise as I saw two men approaching. The leading one wore the cap of a Nazi paratrooper officer, carrying a Luger pistol in his right hand, with a machine gun dangling from a strap at his side. Behind him, dressed in a green uniform with more familiar grey colours at the sleeves and from the shins down, was another paratrooper, carrying a device not unlike the radio I’d just been holding.

‘I am Oberst Schaffer,’ the officer said with a twitch of a smile of his cruel mouth. ‘Believe it or not, I have no quarrel with you *Britischers*.’

‘That’s rich, given what you’re doing to my men out there,’ Bilke snarled. His hand was again firmly at his holster, ready to take out his pistol at a moment’s notice. ‘Who is your quarrel with then, may I ask?’

Schaffer raised the Luger, pointing it toward the creatures. ‘The Vril, of course. The traitors!’

‘The Vril? Is that what they are? What an odd name.’ Bilke said, I suspect out of having nothing else to say. The name, however, spoke volumes to me.

‘As in the Vril Society?’ I asked, stepping forward. I stopped between the Vril and the Doctor. It was he who registered what I was saying.

‘A pre-War German group interested in all matters esoteric,’ I continued. The Doctor nodded his agreement. ‘Including the idea of contacting extra-terrestrials

and uncovering technology lost here on Earth. The things one learns from reading reports from Auntie.'

'And brought into the SS once the Nazis came to power,' the Doctor concluded. 'I had picked up a few details here and there, from various correspondence. To think old Willy Ley insisted it was all utter nonsense.'

The Doctor clicked his tongue, his gaze moving from the paratroopers to the little grey beings. 'But then, the line between fact and fiction can be a fine one, indeed. Something that our little grey friends tried to exploit.'

The creature's heads straightened. The Doctor shook his head at them as one began to raise an arm. He looked to Schaffer.

'Not that your lot needed much help with their technology, mind you. But then, every side is working on so-called "wonder weapons". It's part of why they came out of the shadows, along with the ecological damage. They bet on the wrong side, though.'

'Germany can still–' Schaffer began to say. The Doctor took a step forward, raising his hands to the lapels of his coat.

'Come now, Oberst Schaffer. We can drop any pretence here. Everyone in this room knows that with the Allies sweeping across France and toward the Rhine, it's only a matter of time before the war is over. It won't be this Christmas, I'll grant you, but this time next year, this terrible conflict will finally be over, and Germany will be in ruins.'

I saw the young paratrooper behind Schaffer give his commander a sideways look. The Oberst looked at the young man, who snapped to attention in an instant. Schaffer saw it and let out a long, defeated sigh.

'What you say is true. The Vril promised us weapons to defeat your armies, restore *Festung Europa* to its past glory. But they have not been so forthcoming.'

'Our bargain is null and void,' the voice whispered through the radio. 'Your technological development is not far enough along for our aid to be of practical use.'

I saw Schaffer shake with anger. 'And the *Britischers* and *Amerikaners* are?'

The Doctor let out a loud, 'Ah!' He chuckled and looked to Schaffer. 'Don't you see? Britain is just next on the menu for them, a chance at influence over a world that is increasingly no longer their own. That's all any of this is.'

The sounds of gunfire outside had begun to fade away. The Doctor pointed toward the open hangar door, even before a handful of beleaguered paratroopers came running into the hangar. One of them shouted to Schaffer, his name and rank being the only words I understood. His tone, however, told me all I needed to know.

'Sounds like the day is not yours, Oberst Schaffer,' I said with more confidence than I should have. 'Why not surrender to the Group Captain here and be done?'

'I still have my orders to complete,' he informed me. He yelled to his men, who turned to one member in particular, carrying a knapsack. As the paratroopers gathered, I looked to the Doctor. He caught my gaze and offered a smile before looking to Schaffer.'

'And what were those orders, Oberst? To kill your former Vril allies?'

'And to keep their secrets from *Britischer* hands,' Schaffer confirmed. 'I had hoped to come back from this mission, but it appears that this is our time to die for the Fatherland.'

From the knapsack, the German soldiers pulled explosives and detonator wire. They were going to destroy the hangar, of course, and us with it. I looked to the Doctor again, to see he was concentrating on Schaffer.

'No one else has to die tonight, Herr Oberst.' Then the Doctor, to the surprise of Bilke and myself, began to speak in fluent German. The sound of their native tongue caught the paratroopers' attention as they all froze, watching and listening to his every word. Even the Vril, or whatever they called themselves, looked on in silence. At last, the Doctor finished, clearing his throat.

'Would those terms be acceptable to you, Herr Oberst?'

Schaffer was silent. He looked to me first, melancholy in those brown eyes, then to his men. Scattered all around us, like the debris that had brought us all here, they stared back at him. The Oberst took off his cap, running a hand through his sweaty brown hair. Then he replaced it atop his head and popped the magazine out of his Luger. He said some soft words in German, the paratroopers laying down their weapons with some hesitation.

'I agree to your terms, Herr Doctor.' Schaffer moved past him to Bilke, holding out the emptied pistol. 'On behalf of myself and my men, I surrender to you, Group Captain, upon completion of our second objective.'

'Second objective?' Bilke asked cautiously. He looked to the Doctor, who merely nodded at him.

'Let them do it,' the Doctor told him. Bilke looked to me, then.

'Best do as the Doctor says,' I said with a reassuring smile. Bilke took the German pistol, looking at the foreign weapon in his hands as Schaffer turned and nodded to his men. It was hearing their activity that made the Group Captain raise his head in alarm.

'What the devil?' He called out. The Doctor stepped over to him, raising a reassuring hand that he put on his shoulder.

'The French have a word for what is happening here, Group Captain. It is called détente.'

'And that has to do with a bunch of Nazi paratroopers getting ready to destroy one of my hangars exactly how, precisely?'

The Doctor smiled. 'It means they don't have the Vril technology, and we won't have it either. Speaking of which...' The Doctor turned toward the two grey beings, silently observing the situation. 'Humanity isn't ready for contact with a crypto terrestrial intelligence. It may never be prepared for it, if I'm honest. Leave them alone before you do genuine harm to them. Agree?'

The Vril said nothing. They looked away from us and turned toward the hangar door. They began to move, but I heard Bilke cock his pistol behind us. We all turned to see him, grey eyes down the sights of his weapon.

'Agree?' The Group Captain repeated. The Vril raised both of their arms.

'We concur,' their voice whispered through the radio. 'We shall leave and not return here.'

Bilke lowered his pistol. The Vril looked to the Doctor, who gave them a nod of acceptance. Without a further utterance, the Vril began to move on their thin, wobbling legs toward the door. A part of me wanted them to stop and look back, one last glimpse of these creatures with whom we unknowingly shared our world. They did not stop, however, merely walked out into the night and to whatever craft had conveyed them here.

A barked phrase in German caught my attention. I turned to see Schaffer's men around him, with the Oberst holding a plunger-type detonator in his hands. The Doctor and Bilke looked to him, and Schaffer looked back at them.

'All is prepared,' he informed us. 'Shall we step outside, as I think is the expression?'

'After you,' Bilke replied, holding up his pistol. The German paratroopers began to move, with Bilke following them and us bringing up the tail of this unlikely wartime meeting.

'You'll have a lot to explain to Auntie,' the Doctor said as we walked. 'It should make for interesting reading, if nothing else.'

'I'm not sure how Auntie will feel about losing not only an RAF hangar but a potential secret weapon and ally.' I suspect as you read this, you know what I meant by that. The Doctor, as always, was more philosophical about things.

'Humanity has enough on its plate without the help or hindrance of someone else. Besides, the situation could have been worse.'

My steps faltered. I turned to look at the Doctor, who stopped a few steps ahead of me, tightening his coat around his grey suit.

'What do you mean?' I asked him. The Doctor raised a quizzical eyebrow.

'Well, just imagine if these Vril had gone to the Americans. Now that would have been something to worry about!'

THE FIRST ENGLISHMEN

by Daniel Tessier

Historian's note: This adventure is also known as 500,000 BC *and* The Tribe of Crumb.

The boy awoke, gaping his wide mouth in an impressive yawn. Dazzled by the morning sun, he blinked profusely. He stretched the tight muscles of his arms and legs, before rolling from his back onto his front, finally pushing himself off the ground. He straightened into a standing position, rubbing his eyes with the backs of his thickly-haired hands, before brushing the worst of the night's dust from his body.

It had been a rotten, uncomfortable night's sleep, relegated to the dirt pit instead of the cosiness of the fur-piles in the hut, or even the relative comfort of the grasses. All because he'd stolen some fruit from the girls. Chewing absently on a gnarled fingernail, he sloped back to the cave, hoping his bad behaviour had been forgiven, or better still, forgotten.

A grumble in his stomach convinced him to take a detour to the wood. Maybe he could find some decent fruit of his own. Maybe even take enough back so that he'd be the favourite again.

It was as he approached the mouth of the wood that something bizarre and terrifying burst out at him. Something like a man, but taller, covered in strange-coloured fuzzy skin, with something sitting on his head and something long, dark and unrecognisable in his hands.

'By jingo!' said Professor Garden, gripping his rifle. 'Fellows, I've got one!'

* * *

Cedric ran happily into the clearing, the long grass whipping against his bare legs, gorses sticking to his thick shorts. Turning his head mid-dash, he gestured widely to his sister and father.

'Come on, you two!' he cried. 'You're missing it!'

'Missing what?' called Jilly after him, making her way through the grass rather more daintily, hoping not to spoil her summer dress.

'The afternoon!' said Cedric, as if it were perfectly obvious, and ran on further.

The Doctor strode after them, doing his best to keep up without having to resort to actually running. His breeches protected his legs from the whipping of the grass, his broad-brimmed hat from the glare of the sun.

'Now Cedric, don't run too far,' he cried after his son. 'Be certain I can keep an eye on you.' He sighed ruefully to himself, knowing that the boy was far too like himself to listen to such an order.

'Where have we come to this time, Father?' asked Jilly, half watching him, half following her brother.

‘We’re somewhere near Sheffield Park, I believe, in Sussex.’

A grating squawk made them both look up, and they saw a huge, dark bird, twice the size of an eagle, swoop overhead and then fly off into the distance.

Jilly looked around, taking in this and the almost tropical appearance of the trees that lined the clearing.

‘All right Father, *when* have we come to?’

The Doctor smiled.

‘It is precisely one o’clock in the afternoon, on the fourth of May, 500,000 BC.’

‘500,000 BC!’ cried Cedric, swerving back towards them with his arms stretched out like an aeroplane’s wings. ‘That’s like a million years!’

‘It’s half a million years, silly,’ said Jilly, tutting at him.

‘Well, I said it’s *like* a million years, not it *is* a million years,’ pointed out Cedric. The brother and sister both gave their father a brief look to make sure he wasn’t watching them, then stuck their tongues out at each other in unison. The Doctor, who saw exactly what they were doing, feigned ignorance.

Cedric made a thoughtful face, which was very similar to the face he made when eating a toffee.

‘Shouldn’t we be in the ice age?’ he asked, thinking back to his Sunday afternoons reading books on prehistoric animals.

‘Northern Europe is currently in what’s called an interglacial, or warm period,’ said the Doctor, never happier than when imparting knowledge. ‘Each interglacial has a name, you know. I’m not completely certain of this one, but I’m fairly sure it’s Cromer.’

The trio made their way onwards, bypassing the foreboding wood and tracing a path round it, Cedric alternating his aeroplane impression with skipping and running, and Jilly indulging in the occasional cartwheel where the grass wasn’t too tall or thick. Eventually, Cedric tired, returning to the Doctor’s side.

‘My legs are sore,’ he said, rubbing the ruddy skin.

‘Too much running through rough grass in short trousers,’ said the Doctor.

‘Not very well looked after, is it?’ said the boy. ‘Couldn’t play a game of cricket in this.’

‘Father,’ cried Jilly, grasping his hand, ‘there’s some people over there, by the other end of the woods.’

The Doctor followed her pointing finger, and she was indeed right. The Doctor’s inhumanly acute eyesight allowed him to make out a group of around a dozen short, dark-haired, shaggy people, and –

‘Oh dear,’ said the Doctor. ‘Now that can’t be right.’ He picked up the pace, his children keeping up comfortably.

‘Are they cavemen?’ asked Jilly.

‘Perhaps,’ said the Doctor, with concern in his voice.

‘There’s three blokes with them!’ exclaimed Cedric, as they got closer.

‘Indeed,’ grumbled the Doctor, ‘and I’ve told you about using language like that.’

It wasn’t very long before the three men, their impeccable tweeds contrasting greatly with the simple loincloths of the prehistoric folk, saw the family approach and moved to meet them. They groups met each other halfway, eyeing each other with uncertainty and suspicion.

A tall man with impressive muttonchops, a rifle strapped to his back, appeared

in de facto lead of the group. He looked the Doctor up-and-down, scrutinising him.

'Now then,' he said, 'I'm rather certain you're not a native.'

'I'm rather certain you're not either,' pointed out the Doctor, quite reasonably he thought.

'Well, ah, technically,' said the second of the men, a slighter, shorter figure, 'we are natives, aren't we? I mean, I was born in Pimlico.'

'I hope you brought your passport,' said the Doctor, before changing the subject. 'Let's clear this all up, shall we? I'm known as the Doctor, and these are my children, Jilly and Cedric. We are travellers, as I surmise you are.'

'Travellers?' said the third man, a stout fellow with a broad moustache. 'As in... *time* travellers?' He whispered the 'time,' as if someone was eavesdropping round the corner.

'Foreign operation, is it?' said the first man, gruffly. 'Dash it all, you're not the ruddy Americans, are you?'

'Language!' piped up Cedric.

'And certainly not,' said Jilly. 'We're as English as you are.'

The Doctor looked briefly perturbed by this, but said nothing.

'Oh really, let's just settle this,' said the second man. 'My name is Cornelius Crumb, Professor of Anthropology, and these are my associates, Professor Andrew Garden and Doctor Hugh Holroyd.' He gestured at the tall man and the broad man in turn. 'We're on a paleo-anthropological expedition for the British government. Now, who do you represent?'

'Myself, and no other,' said the Doctor. 'Although I have been known to help the British government from time to time. What year have you come here from, may I ask?'

'Nineteen-eighty,' said Crumb, receiving a sharp look from Garden.

'Tell them everything, why don't you!'

'Oh, what does it matter, Andrew,' said Holroyd. 'They've obviously got a time machine themselves, or they wouldn't be here.'

The Doctor twitched his whiskers as he thought to himself.

'Nineteen-eighty, nineteen-eighty... I don't suppose any of you were involved in the repelling of the Magma-Men back in seventy-eight?'

'Good grief,' said Holroyd, an expression of surprise all over his moustache. 'You mean to say you were down there under King's Cross Station in all that debacle?'

'I lent a hand,' smiled the Doctor.

'Oh, Father,' said Jilly, 'Tell them about the time we fought the Mighty Mole!'

'Or Hitler's Robot!' suggested Cedric, excitedly.

'I've heard of this chap,' said Holroyd. 'Bit of a mysterious cove, but certainly no American interloper, of that I'm sure.'

'You see, I have developed my own, rather unique method of time travel, and I was just on a little excursion with the youngsters. I certainly wasn't expecting to meet any other travellers here. Now, nineteen-eighty... the third Venus mission's just getting underway, yes? And on the sly, you're experimenting with time travel.'

'First trip of its kind,' said Crumb. 'We're investigating this lot.' He gestured towards the prehistoric natives, who were watching the conversation in curiosity.

‘Of course,’ said the Doctor, ‘*Eoanthropus dawsoni*, or *Homo piltdownensis* – the Piltdown Man. The ancient ancestor of mankind, the link between man and ape.’

‘The very first Englishmen,’ said Holroyd, proudly. ‘We are here to investigate them, learn from them, and take back our findings to modern Britain so that we might better know ourselves.’

‘They’re really quite intelligent,’ said Crumb. He gestured towards their settlement. ‘You’ll notice they build huts from animal bone and skin, and have cleared this area of the long grass to make it more habitable. While they’re still hunter-gatherers, I’m certain they’ll be able to grasp the rudiments of agriculture. Yes, they’re quite civilisable. In fact, we’ve been teaching them a thing or two. They’ve taken to learning marvellously.’

Suddenly, Cedric dashed from the Doctor’s side towards the Piltdown Men.

‘Now, Cedric, come back here at once!’ reprimanded the Doctor.

The boy, though, veered past the hominids towards their settlement. He gawped at a strange structure – three tall, narrow bones embedded in the ground by their pointed ends, with shorter bones balanced carefully upon them.

‘They’re cricket stumps!’ exclaimed Cedric, joyfully.

‘Oh, Cedric, you’re being silly again,’ said Jilly, disapprovingly.

Professor Crumb smiled.

‘Oh no, he’s dead right. We’ve been teaching them. Some of them are struggling to grasp the essentials, but I’m fairly certain that Shorty has gotten the hang of overarm bowling.’

‘Father, can we have a game? Please?’ Cedric was practically bouncing with excitement.

‘Well, I’m afraid that’s rather up to these gentlemen,’ said the Doctor. He addressed the scientists. ‘Well, what say you?’

* * *

What passed for a cricket match amongst the Piltdowners was a scrappy affair. The three scientists led one side of the anthropoids, while the Doctor and family led another. Crumb had suggested that Jilly keep score, an idea to which she wrinkled her nose, and which was rapidly abandoned in favour of her remarkable turn as bowler. The Doctor, who secretly had never really understood the rules of the sport anyway, got stuck in with aplomb. Cedric fussed over the rules even more than Crumb did, but given that the Piltdowners were mostly concerned with hitting the ball (a genuine Dukes, brought by Crumb from the twentieth century) with their bats (hewn from elephant bone) as far as possible regardless of which side they were on or who was supposed to be batting, it didn’t really matter.

Regardless of the chaos, it was good fun, until the Doctor, attempting to catch out Holroyd, was knocked unconscious by the ball.

He awoke to a swimming vision of stars, which cleared to become the faces of his children.

‘Father?’ gasped Jilly in worry.

‘Miss Weston?’ he mumbled, momentarily confused.

‘Who?’ said Cedric, with baffled look upon his flushed face.

‘Oh... oh, forgive me, I was forgetting who I was for a moment there.’ The Doctor stumbled to his feet, shaking his head gently. ‘I take it I didn’t catch it?’

‘I think perhaps that’s enough of cricket class for today,’ said Garden firmly, and the Doctor was unable to disagree. Cedric made a face, but a sharp look from his father, whose wits were quickly returning, made him drop it immediately.

The afternoon passed to early evening, granting everyone a respite from the heat. The six time travellers followed the Piltdowners back to their settlement, a collection of only half a dozen huts. Perhaps more like large tents, animal hide stretched tight over bone and wooden supports, they each appeared big enough to comfortably house five or six, if they didn’t mind cuddling up at bedtime. There were as many Piltdown Women as Piltdown Men at the settlement, with small, fuzzy-skinned children running around and getting under their feet. The women were as scantily-dressed as the men, causing Cedric to blush a ferocious shade of pink, while the smallest children happily ran around as naked as the day they were born.

Some of the men were carving up the bloated carcass of what looked like a rhinoceros, while several women prepared a large fire, away from the huts. Jilly wrinkled her nose in disgust again as the men lopped off chunks of meat. Garden caught her look and scoffed.

‘Way of the world, my dear,’ he said. ‘It’s only natural. No different to beef steak or lamb chops.’

‘I know,’ she replied, ‘but I don’t much like seeing it done.’

‘How come there are rhinos here anyway?’ asked Cedric, pleased to be able to focus on something enjoyably gruesome. ‘I thought they only lived in Africa.’

‘And Asia,’ pointed out Jilly.

‘All sorts of megafauna in and around Europe in this epoch,’ said the Doctor, slipping naturally into the tone of a lecturer, as he often did when imparting some valuable knowledge. ‘You might find Merck’s rhinoceros, aurochs, the steppe bison – even the odd hippopotamus.’

‘That’s why I carry this,’ said Garden, flicking his head towards the rifle on his back. ‘Bad enough coming across wolves and bears, let alone a dashed hippo or elephant.’

‘Is it really necessary?’ said the Doctor. ‘The locals get on fine without such brutal weapons.’

‘They get on fine without penicillin, electricity or a sewer system, but I’m still looking forward to getting back to those.’

A young Piltdowner, looking around twelve or thirteen, ran up to Garden with a smile on his face.

‘Hello there, Sport,’ said the scientist, clapping the boy on the back. The young native pointed excitedly at the feast being prepared by his people.

‘Oh, yes,’ said Garden, as if talking to a toddler. He made a big show of rubbing his belly. ‘Yum yum.’

The evening passed pleasantly enough, with the three scientists enjoying their roasted rhino, adding a few vitamin pills to their cups of tea. The Doctor pulled a paper bag from within his loose tunic, taking out a selection of unappealing looking food pills which he shared with his children.

‘Can’t I try some of the rhino?’ asked Cedric, imploringly.

‘You can have a drumstick if you can carry it,’ replied his father.

‘You can always programme the food machine to make rhino-flavoured pills when we get back to the Ship,’ suggested Jilly, but her brother was unconvinced.

The Doctor engaged the scientists in conversation, eager to learn more of their work.

‘That young lad seemed fond of you, Professor Garden,’ he observed.

‘Oh, Sport? First native we met when we arrived,’ he said, munching on his dinner. ‘He was scared at first, but then he took a bit of a shine to me. From what we can make out, he has no father. Probably ran afoul of some wild beast.’

‘How do you communicate with the locals?’ asked the Doctor.

‘With difficulty,’ admitted Crumb. ‘They don’t have much in the way of language, and they don’t even seem to have names except those we give them, but they’re tremendous mimics. They learn actions very quickly.’

Holroyd shook his head.

‘My esteemed colleague is mistaken. While the Piltdowners have no verbal ability, they clearly have some form of sign language. No doubt they can refer to each other using unique gestures. If only I could decode what any of them meant.’

‘It would make teaching them easier, if we could speak their language,’ added Crumb. ‘So to, ah, speak.’

‘Why are you so insistent on “civilising” these people?’ said Holroyd. ‘They’re perfectly suited to their own world and time. The cricket’s a jolly diversion, but what do you hope to gain from teaching it to them?’

‘The cricket’s a bit of fun,’ said Cornelius. ‘If they can understand that, though, imagine what else they could grasp. With our guidance, they could advance far beyond their current limited scope.’

‘To what end? Do you expect to save them from their eventual extinction? That would be a pretty situation to find ourselves in when we go back to nineteen-eighty, and find the world overrun with Piltdowners and not a *Homo sapiens* in sight.’

‘You’re assuming they do become extinct,’ insisted Cornelius. ‘In my view, these gentle creatures are our own forebears, already on the path to greatness...’

The Doctor watched the two scientists ruefully, as if conducting his own anthropological observation. It was clear that this was an argument that was already well-worn. He wondered how many times they’d had it out before they even stepped foot in their time machine. Oh, that was a thought...

‘Gentlemen,’ interrupted the Doctor, ‘might I ask how you came to be in this time? You have a vessel of some kind, I presume?’

It was Garden who stepped in to answer this.

‘Naturally. Something the engineers cooked up – the *Huxley*. Kept somewhere safe nearby, where none of the natives can get their hands on it – or anyone else, for that matter.’ He eyed the Doctor carefully.

‘You needn’t look at me like that,’ he replied. ‘My Ship is also nearby and safe, and I dare say it would knock the spots off yours. No disrespect to your engineers, of course.’

‘Naturally,’ said Cornelius, smiling. ‘Although having you here could be a godsend, Doctor. Our technical support, Gregory, sadly didn’t make it through the first couple of days here.’

‘Savaged by a bear,’ clarified Garden. ‘Would have done for the rest of us too, no doubt, were it not for old faithful here.’ He tapped his rifle again.

‘You killed it?’ gasped Jilly and Cedric together, having let the grown-ups talk to themselves for long enough.

‘What would you have me do with a ravenous predator?’ snapped Garden. ‘Give it a stern talking-to? A jolly good smacked bottom?’

Chastened, the children slipped into silence. The Doctor reached into his tunic again, retrieving, against all probability, a thermos of cocoa and two cups. With sufficient chocolate, any harsh words would soon be forgotten.

The sun dipped below the horizon, and discussions began over which hut would house the three newcomers until morning

* * *

The next morning brought with it refreshed enthusiasm for all the travellers. Cedric, his mighty reserves of energy fully recharged, tore off towards the wood with four of the Piltdown children, pausing just long enough to be ordered not to actually go into the thick of the forest.

‘Keep where we can see you,’ said the Doctor. ‘You don’t know what might be in there.’

Remembering the bear, Cedric nodded gravely, before turning and pelting after the rest of the children.

Jilly, with the blessing of Professor Cornelius, was showing a small group of Piltdowners how to make tea. The Doctor, naturally, always kept some in his pockets, and the anthropologists had brought a small supply, giving the prehistoric people a choice between Darjeeling or a more timely English Breakfast. The Doctor had managed to produce two more plastic cups from within his tunic, which, along with the four china cups the scientists had brought with them, made for a quite satisfactory tea set.

Unfortunately, the pot met its end only minutes into the lesson when one of the older women picked it up and immediately dropped it. Never one to give up at the first hurdle, Jilly had replaced it with the braincase of an animal that one of the hominids had been using to carry water from a nearby stream. Cornelius carefully ladled the boiling water from his portable stove into the skull, as Jilly delicately added the tea leaves.

With Holroyd patiently observing all that was going on around the settlement, the Doctor let his attention drift to the third member of the team. As everyone else was occupied, Garden was quietly making his way into the forest, slipping in amongst the trees and disappearing from view. The Doctor made a pretence of watching Cedric and his new friends as they climbed the branches of the tallest tree on the wood’s edge, all the while keeping half an eye and two-thirds of an ear on the scientist.

When he was sure he wouldn’t be heard, he slipped between the trees himself, treading carefully so as to remain quiet. Following the tell-tale disturbances made by booted feet trampling through undergrowth, he trailed the Professor through the wood. In time, he came to the edge of another clearing. Peering out from between the trees, he watched the scene in front of him carefully.

A broad, bronze-coloured structure, the rough proportions of a British army

tank, sat heavily in the clearing. It had no wheels, sitting instead upon three thick rails, but nonetheless its appearance suggested it was a vehicle of some kind. A hatch on the centre right of the machine had been lifted open, and Garden was visible inside, sat upon a plush leather seat in front of a bank of controls and readouts. He studied them intently, tweaking knobs and twisting dials as he did so. He muttered to himself, almost inaudibly, although the Doctor could pick up the occasional grunted, 'Yes,' or, 'Very good.' The Doctor could see that Garden had unslung his rifle and set it down by his side. He wouldn't be able to sneak up on him without being seen, he was sure, but if he could get him away from the vessel, he might at least forget the weapon for a moment.

'Might I be of assistance?' he loudly, announcing his presence. Garden's head snapped up sharply, fixing the Doctor with an aggressive scowl.

'What are you doing here, Doctor?'

'Well, if I see someone sneaking off, I just can't help but follow them. Curiosity, I suppose. Now, it seems strange to me that an anthropologist would be so involved with the technical side of things. Almost as strange as a mission like this being dispatched with only one technician.'

Garden slid out of the vehicle, his boots thudding on the ground. The Doctor kept his distance, circling around the vehicle as he talked. Garden was forced to follow him, the machine and the gun briefly forgotten.

'In fact,' said the Doctor, 'I'd say that you haven't been entirely honest with me, and probably not with your fellow travellers. I take it they don't know you've been sneaking back here?'

'Sometimes I tell them I'm going to check on the condition of the *Huxley*, make sure it hasn't been overrun with prehistoric beasties or some such. Other times I simply trot off when they're distracted, which happens all too often.'

'So, why keep your mission a secret? What is it you were sent to do?'

'What does it matter to you, Doctor? Are you a spy after all? Sent to see Britain's first journey into time?'

'Oh, I couldn't care less about your politics. Let's just say I have a... professional interest in time travel and would like to know what you're up to. Crumb might have a dream to teach the Piltdown Men snakes and ladders, and Holroyd seems genuinely eager to learn from them, but something tells me you're here for a different reason.'

'Those two,' sighed Garden. 'Decent sorts, but not very practical in their thinking. The engineers who built the *Huxley*, all they wanted to do was show off their technical skills. No, some of us have more ambition than merely writing a new paper and going for that Nobel Prize. Fortunately, there are some in our government who saw this journey as the opportunity it really is.'

'Go on,' said the Doctor, intrigued.

'Britain is no longer the great power it once was, Doctor. The twentieth century has been one crisis after another, and the world has changed. We need to rebuild Britain, to be better and stronger, and for that, we need labour. The Piltdowners are perfect: intelligent enough to follow our orders, simple enough not to question them. In return, of course, they'd receive all the comforts and benefits of our more sophisticated age.'

The Doctor scoffed.

'Oh, come now, you don't really believe that's what it would be like? When has

a group of people taken as a labour force ever been treated with respect? No, I think this is something the other two need to hear.'

'I doubt very much they'll side with you, whomever you represent, over their own country's needs.'

'Are you certain of that? Whatever you report back, Crumb and Holroyd will have to back you up. If they're not on your side, they could make it very difficult for you.'

'We'll see,' snarled Garden, turning on his heel and dashing back towards the wood.

The Doctor ran after him, but without too much concern. In his haste, Garden had abandoned his weapon, just as the Doctor had hoped. Without that, he must depend on his words alone, and the Doctor was confident the others would care more about the fate of the Piltdowners.

The Doctor jogged comfortably, in spite of the many layers that made up his outfit. Garden, on the other hand, was visibly sweating, his heavy tweeds being unsuitable for charging through a forest in the summer heat. A human being could have smelled him if they got close; for the *Homotherium* that lounged between the tress he had just passed, the scent was overpowering. Shaking itself out of its light slumber, the sabre-toothed cat calmly followed the man, intrigued by this new prey specimen. Keeping to the shadows and stepping lightly in spite of its heavyset, lion-sized frame, neither Garden nor the Doctor saw or heard it.

Garden burst into the busy congregation of Piltdowners and time-travellers.

'Crumb!' he shouted. 'Holroyd! I must speak with you. That Doctor – he's going to try to turn you against me. You've got to listen to me before he starts meddling!'

Holroyd walked calmly to his colleague, looking him up and down, frowning deeply.

'What in heaven's name has gotten into you, man? What's all this talk of the Doctor?'

'Now, now Andrew,' said Crumb, joining them. 'Calm yourself down, and let's talk about this.'

'Go on Garden,' said the Doctor, strolling out of the wood. 'Tell them what you told me.'

Cedric, who was hanging upside-down from a tree branch, plopped down onto the ground. Jilly trotted over to join him and the Doctor.

'Father, what's going on?' she asked.

'Mr Garden here has been making his own plans for these people,' explained the Doctor, 'and now he's going to tell us all about it.'

Garden opened his mouth to speak, taking a moment to choose his words, when a terrifying growl silenced everyone.

Everyone, scientists, children and prehistoric locals, stood stock still, rooted in fear at the sight of the sabre-tooth that stood at the edge of the wood.

Slowly moving out of its shelter, the cat curled back its upper lip in a snarl, exposing even more of the huge, scimitar-like canines that dominated its face.

'It's a sabre-toothed tiger!' gasped Cedric, excited in spite of the imminent danger.

'It's not technically a tiger–' began the Doctor, before stopping himself and putting that fact away for a more appropriate time. The beast looked around,

having suddenly gone from pursuing one strange animal to exposing itself to a whole tribe of them. Fear gripped it, as it gripped the people it faced, but beneath that was hunger. Had it been able to understand that its lack of decent-sized meals was largely down to the Piltdowners' hunting trips, it might have been more inclined to attack.

But the cat seemed to come to a decision, and slowly, almost imperceptibly, it began to back away... and then Garden did something very foolish. Overcome by fear, he ran, away from the wood and towards the settlement. The cat, unable to disobey its ingrained instinct to chase its prey, launched itself after him. In seconds, it had him pinned down with its powerful, viciously clawed paws. It reared its head back, its mighty fangs poised to tear the man to shreds.

A cricket ball flew through the air and walloped the beast on the head. Startled, it loosened its grip, but did not let Garden go.

'Good shot!' cried Crumb.

Everyone turned to look at where the ball had come from. The boy that had taken such a shine to Garden stood there, looking intently at the man and the great cat. Having used the only ball, he stooped to pick up one of the elephant bone cricket bats and charged at the beast.

The cat reared up, losing its grip on Garden completely. He slithered away, as the boy went at the beast with his bat. Catching on, more of the Piltdowners joined in, grabbing whatever bones, sticks and rocks there were to hand, clubbing and throwing them at the cat until, with a whimpered snarl, it finally gave in. Darting back to the wood with its tail between its legs, it resigned itself to finding easier prey.

The boy extended a hand to Garden, helping him up off the ground.

'I say,' he mumbled, 'I don't know what to say. Thank you, Sport. You saved my life.'

The Doctor came up to the pair, shaking Sport firmly by the hand before turning to address Garden.

'Now then, Professor. Are you really going to thank your friend here by selling him and his people into servitude?'

Garden stood silently, chastened.

* * *

The Doctor stepped triumphantly out of the *Huxley*, dabbing at his forehead with a silk handkerchief.

'That should take care of it,' he announced, smiling. 'I'm sure you'd have got it working eventually, but that will definitely get you on a smooth journey home.' To Jilly and Cedric, who were eagerly exploring the time machine, he quietly added: 'And no further – I've rigged it for one trip only.' He winked at the children, causing a burst of giggles from them both.

'What are we to tell the ministry?' asked Gardner. 'They're expecting a report on the viability of the Piltdown Project.'

'Not to mention the papers we've been planning,' added Crumb.

'Gentlemen,' said the Doctor, 'I think it would be best if you fudged the truth

somewhat. In fact, don't mention the Piltdowners at all. Say that there was neither hide nor hair of them. No evidence of their existence whatsoever.'

'What about the fossils?' said Holroyd. 'That's some rather inarguable evidence there.'

'Oh, I don't know. Maybe you can convince them they've been misinterpreted. You might even be able to convince them they're fakes. With three such notable scientists backing each other up, why would they not believe you?'

The Doctor took both his children by the hand, and walked away from the scientists and their travel machine.

'Do you really think people will believe the Piltdown Men aren't real?' asked Jilly.

'With fossils of them and everything?' added Cedric.

'I think so,' said the Doctor. 'People will believe anything.'

RETROGENESIS, Part 3

by Philip Purser-Hallard

Excerpt from *The Perfect Planet*

'You see, Cedric,' the Doctor told his son kindly, 'the Kelda are teachers and philosophers. They visit worlds across the universe to find out how evolved their civilisations are. If they find them ready for the privilege, they share their knowledge and their technology with them, until they're advanced enough to join the Kelda's Commonwealth. If they find they're still too primitive, the Kelda simply hibernate in their stone spaceships until that changes! They can sleep for thousands of years if they want to.'

'Coo,' said Cedric, impressed.

His father rested a fond hand on Cedric's shoulder, and another on his sister Jilly's, as they stood on the high balcony and looked out over the city of Utopolis. The twin suns shone on tall, elegant spires between which flying discs swooped, gracefully ferrying the slender Utopolans from one tower-top eyrie to another. The music from the ever-present sunchimes played sweetly around them, and the air was spiced with something between cinnamon and honey.

'It's smashing here,' Cedric noted, solemnly.

'We've met the Utopolans,' said Jilly, always the more thoughtful of the two, 'and they do seem frightfully advanced. But Father, what exactly *is* a Kelda?'

'Well, that I never quite found out,' the Doctor admitted, stroking his beard pensively. 'But here's what I think. As a species' scientific knowledge gets more and more developed, they find ways to change and improve their biological makeup. First, they give themselves better limbs and organs, and then they start altering their cells so they can pass their new inventions onto their children. After a while, though, they find their biological bodies aren't enough for them, and they begin to experiment with machinery. They move their minds into machine bodies that can deal with any environment, from space to underwater, and can achieve all kinds of tasks a normal body couldn't. And then, if they are able to make the last, most difficult leap... they grow beyond even that.'

'But what could be beyond that?' Jilly asked.

A fluting voice behind them said, '*I am.*'

They turned to see a figure that looked as if it was made out of light. It should have hurt their eyes to look at it, but they could see its every feature clearly. It was manlike, yet womanlike as well, as if it had grown away from such distinctions. It wore a skirt and tunic that the children thought looked rather Greek, and its face was the most beautiful that they had ever seen.

'*My name,*' the figure said, '*is Aldorac. We have been watching you and your family for some time, Doctor.*'

The Doctor doffed his broad-brimmed hat. 'We're pleased to meet you,' he said. 'Pleased and honoured.'

'Are you an angel?' Cedric asked the Kelda, in awe.

‘Oh no, Cedric.’ His father winked at him. ‘Angels are quite different.’

SWAN SONG

by Andrew Hickey

It has often been said that there are two kinds of people in the world – or, indeed, out of the world – and that one can tell which kind somebody is by their reaction to the sound of screaming. There are those whose reaction is to run away from the screaming, to avoid being hurt by whatever is causing the noise, and those whose reaction is to run towards the sound, to help whoever is screaming.

The Doctor, even when he was feeling unwell, as he was today, had always been, and would always be, someone who would run towards the screams.

This went doubly when the screams were in his own Ship, a space he did his utmost to ensure was as safe as any place in the universe, and where screams were almost never heard.

And when it was the voice of one of his own children screaming, as this scream clearly was, there was no power in the universe that could have stopped the Doctor sprinting towards it. Not the Death-Squids of Neptune, not the Dread Pantheon of Orion, and certainly not anything as insignificant as a hacking cough.

He ran down the corridors, turning first right, then left, then right again, through a maze of twisty passages, apparently all alike, but which the Doctor knew as intimately as he knew his logarithmic tables, his face flushed with the effort, his normally pristine goatee dishevelled, sweat running down his face. He was going to reach Cedric before it was too late, no matter what the cost to his lungs, which were burning with the effort.

The music room. That was where the scream was coming from. And another noise as well. A hideous clanging. Whatever had got on to the ship must be smashing Cedric against the piano.

And now Jilly was yelling as well. What could possibly be the cause of this? He started fumbling through his pockets as he rounded the last corner, looking for anything that might give him an advantage in combating whatever foul monster had come on board.

He burst through the door... to see Cedric and Jilly sitting at the piano, looking for all the world as if they were enjoying themselves. The screaming stopped as he came in.

‘What...’ the Doctor doubled over, gasping and wheezing, his body able to collapse now the immediate threat was clearly gone, sucking in gasps of the air, which in this room always had a faint taste of old oak and violin resin. ‘What... what was it?’

‘What was what, father?’ asked Cedric.

‘What was attacking you?’

‘Attacking us?’ said Jilly. ‘Father, what’s got into you?’

The Doctor had to force himself not to react angrily. Jilly... no, she insisted on being called Jill, now, didn’t she? Jill was in her teens now, an adult by some standards, and she had a right to interact with him as an adult, not as a little girl. He took a deep breath, which of course set off another coughing fit. Whatever this

infection was he'd picked up on their recent visit to the Violet Moon of Bellerophon, it was seemingly unshakeable. The children had got over it after a day or two, of course, but then children did.

His thoughts were drifting. That was happening a lot, too. Back to the matter at hand. He needed to focus, no matter how tired he was.

'I heard screaming. Cedric sounded as if he was in agony.'

To the Doctor's amazement, his two children burst out laughing.

'I fail to see what could possibly be funny about this,' he managed to gasp out between wheezes.

'Oh, I'm sorry, father,' said Cedric eventually. 'It's just...'

'That wasn't screaming,' said Jill, 'it was singing!'

'Singing? How can you call that singing?'

'I thought I was rather good,' said Cedric, looking rather hurt.

'You were,' said Jill. 'Don't listen to father, he's an old fuddy-duddy. You sounded absolutely marvellous. Just like Teddy Strong.'

The Doctor gasped in a lungful of air, again noticing the resiny scent common to all music rooms throughout the multiverse, and some part of the his vast mind took a second to ponder how every one of his ship's innumerable rooms had a scent all of its own, and how he could probably navigate purely by scent were he to lose his senses of sight and hearing. He snapped himself back to attention, and asked the obvious question. 'And who might Teddy Strong be?'

Jill rolled her eyes, in a way that the Doctor found it hard not to be irritated by. 'Oh, really, father! Teddy Strong is only... well, he's Teddy Strong!'

'He's the most astonishing singer,' said Cedric, earnestly. 'Just absolutely smashing.'

'And this smashing Mr Strong, he screams like that, does he?'

'Oh, he screams, he moans, he... he puts all his emotions into his singing. It's the most wonderful, dreamy, sound,' said Jill, with a faraway expression on her face.

'Hmph. Sounds more nightmarish than dreamy to me,' said the Doctor, smiling at his own mistake now the children appeared to be in no danger. 'But nobody has ever called me an old fuddy-duddy...'

'Apart from all the people who've called you an old fuddy-duddy' said Jill, stifling a giggle.

'Well, yes, apart from them,' the Doctor smiled. 'So I suppose I should listen to this dreamy, screamy... what did you call him?'

'Teddy Strong,' replied Cedric. 'I have his latest disc here.'

Cedric passed a record to the Doctor, who examined the label curiously. It read 'Cry Baby, vocal, Teddy Strong and the Strong Voices, with Orchestral Acc.' Satisfied that this was not some sort of alien mind-control device, but was just a normal shellac record, the Doctor put it on the gramophone.

The first few bars, with violins playing softly and a vocal chorus singing 'Ooh, cry baby, cry cry baby,' sounded almost musical to the Doctor's ears. Then a male voice, which the Doctor could only presume was Mr Strong, came in, singing 'I used to be happy, but now that you left me, I cry, cry baby, I cry.' The voice actually sounded familiar – the Doctor was sure he had heard it somewhere before, and it was surprisingly pleasant.

He started to say, 'That sounds nothing like the racket you were making,' but

then the voice from the gramophone sang 'I cry-eeeee!' and it turned into a shriek so loud and high-pitched that the Doctor began to worry that the glass face on his pocket-watch might shatter.

For the next two minutes, as the violins and chorus continued their refrain, the lead vocalist – the Doctor could not bring himself to think of the voice as a singer – caterwauled, sobbed, shrieked, and begged, going from choking baritone sobs, forced out as if unable to breathe, all the way to a falsetto shriek of agony that the Doctor could only imagine was produced by subjecting a cat to the most vile torments. Occasionally, something recognisable as an English word would make its way out – a 'Please' or a 'Why?' – but for all the Doctor could tell, much of the noise was coming from something that wasn't even human.

As the music – if that was what it was – drew to a close, the Doctor managed to bring himself to smile a little. After all, everyone liked music that would upset their parents, didn't they? Why, he himself… but no, best not to think of that right now.

'So that's what you young people like now, is it?'

'Yes,' said Cedric, 'it's the neatest!'

'Hmm. "Neat" is possibly not the word I would have used for it. But on the other hand… could I hear that again?'

'Why?' asked Jill. 'Do you like it, father?'

The Doctor looked shocked. 'Oh no, far from it! I just thought I recognised something, that's all…'

Jill put the record on again, and the Doctor listened intently to those first few bars, the part where Strong seemed to be singing rather than screaming, and nodded thoughtfully. When the record was over, he said, 'You know, that almost sounds like Fred Bailey, apart from the screaming.'

'Who's Fred Bailey?' asked Jill. 'Is he a pop star too?'

'Who's… who's… I thought I'd raised you better than that!' spluttered the Doctor. 'Fred Bailey is only the greatest singer of the twentieth century. The master of the megaphone, they used to call him when I was a younger man.'

Cedric laughed. 'You mean microphone, surely, not megaphone.'

'Oh no,' said the Doctor. 'This was before they invented microphones. If a singer wanted to be heard above the orchestra, he had to use a megaphone. You must have heard Fred Bailey's records. "Lonesome Hattie from Cincinnati"? "My Girl Eloped With the Melon Man, Now I Cantaloupe Alone"? "The White Feather Girl"? "I Dream that You're Dreaming That I Dream You're Dreaming of Me"?'

His two children shook their heads, and the Doctor looked shocked. 'I realise it's been a while since I played any of my old records, but I didn't think it was so long. Why, your mother and I used to…' he patted himself, looking for something in one of his pockets. 'Ah, there it is!'

He retrieved a key, went over to one of the wooden cabinets lining the walls, and unlocked its door, revealing several dozen records. He lifted one up and inspected the label, blowing dust off it before taking it over to the gramophone. 'This one was always your mother's favourite.'

He placed the record on the gramophone, and set the needle down. The record had been dusty, but it was obvious listening to it that, however long it had been since it had last been played, it had once been played a *lot*. The hissing and crackle that came from the record as it started playing was almost louder than the

music.

Cedric grimaced. ‘I hate the sound of record scratches,’ he said.

The Doctor smiled wistfully. ‘Oh, I don’t know,’ he said. ‘They bring back memories. Every one of those crackles and hisses is like an old friend. I’ve heard them all before so many times. And each one of them, of course, comes from a time when I’ve listened to the record. Like that one just there, that was when you bumped into the radiogram when you were a baby. And that one was when your mother... ah, well... The scratches show that a record has been loved, and make it unique. Anyway –’ he put his finger to his lips ‘– the singing’s about to start’.

And he was right – the trumpets, violins, and banjos stopped playing the melody and started just vamping the chords, and a voice came in, sounding spectral, tinny, and distant, like the voice of a ghost, or a memory. ‘When I look into your eyes/It’s then I realise/That you’re the girl for me/When I see your lovely smile/Then for a little while/I’m in ecstasy...’

Cedric and Jill burst out laughing, and the Doctor looked at them, a hurt expression on his face. Jill sobered up quickly. ‘I’m sorry, Father. It just sounds so... old...’

‘Well, yes,’ said the Doctor. ‘I remember buying that record in 1914, and I suppose that does seem like it was a long time ago to you two – though of course we could go there any time we wanted.’

‘We never have, though, have we, father?’ asked Cedric.

The Doctor shook his head. ‘Oh, no. That was an awful time. The First World War – the Great War, they called it then, though there was nothing great about it. A lot of very good people died, and a lot more got hurt. I try not to take you children to such terrible times.’

‘You took us to the Atom Wars of Orion!’

‘I did, yes. But that was still safer than the Great War was. Blaster fire is a great deal more civilised than mustard gas, I’m afraid, and more discriminating as to who it hurts.’

‘Gosh,’ said Jill. ‘Worse than the Atom Wars? And you lived through them?’

‘Oh yes,’ said the Doctor, a sad look on his face. ‘That was when I was stuck on Earth for about twenty years, when I couldn’t repair the ship. You children have never had to put up with that. Twentieth-century Earth is a lovely place to visit, but it’s far too uncivilised to live there all the time.’

‘But we do live on twentieth-century Earth,’ objected Cedric. ‘You send us to school here!’

‘But we can leave any time we want,’ Jill said. ‘I see what father’s saying. It’s much easier to love somewhere when you know you can walk away at any time, than if you’re stuck there.’

‘I suppose so,’ said Cedric. ‘But at the same time, I’ve always sort of envied our school chums. They have the rest of their lives planned out. They’ll get jobs, and get married, and live in the same place all their lives, and know that tomorrow is going to be just like yesterday. We don’t even know that tomorrow won’t come *before* yesterday.’

The Doctor half-listened to the children’s conversation, but he was preoccupied with memories, and with a voice that had brought too many of those memories rushing back. For some people, like his friend Marcel, it was taste that would do this for them, but that had never triggered the Doctor’s memories. When you have

as many memories as the Doctor had, you couldn't go around remembering things every time you ate a bit of soggy cake. The Doctor had so many memories that he had had to lock many of them away, in places he couldn't access even if he wanted.

But sounds? Ah, those were a different matter. Sounds could open all those doors, if they were the right sounds.

He felt the tears start to come into his eyes and blinked them back. But there was something else about that voice, something that kept nagging at him. Something that required further investigation. He came to a decision.

'Would you two like to go and see a concert by this Mr Strong?'

His children looked at him, excited.

'Oh father, could we?' gasped Jill.

'That would be super!' said Cedric.

'Well,' said the Doctor, 'I had better get my coat, hadn't I?'

* * *

Backstage at the London Palladium, Karl Gruber was, as always, pacing up and down the corridor in front of his client's dressing-room door. He had a rule that under no circumstances was anyone ever to interfere with Teddy Strong's pre-show routine, and he intended to guard him against the invading hordes of fans who would undoubtedly be along shortly to disrupt his charge's preparations.

He chewed nervously on his cigar. He'd been planning this for nearly forty years, and everything he'd been working for since he was a young man hung on this one night. Was Teddy Strong going to succeed, or had his decades of research come to nothing?

He looked at his watch. An hour until Teddy was due on stage. He wondered if other managers, with normal artistes, felt this way before every show. He decided that they probably didn't. Most of the other managers he had met had been philistines; men who had no great love for music or for their charges, but a great deal of love for their own wallets and their vile indulgences.

He had a higher purpose. He knew that what he was doing was the most important thing he could possibly do, and that whatever happened tonight, whether he succeeded or, God forbid, failed, he was doing what he was doing for a reason. Teddy was going to step on to the stage in front of a couple of thousand fans and several million TV viewers, and everything was going to change.

He looked down at his watch again. Fifty-nine minutes to go.

* * *

In the audience, the Doctor, Jill, and Cedric were sat in front-row centre seats.

'This is amazing!' said Cedric. 'Father, how on Earth did you get us such good seats?'

'Oh, Tommy Trinder is a good friend of mine,' said the Doctor.

The crowd started to shift in their seats as the camera men moved into position. The chattering of the audience changed to murmuring. The volume didn't decrease; in fact, if anything, the noise got louder, but it became the noise of everyone talking quietly, rather than of a few people talking at a normal volume. The Doctor looked round to see what the audience was like. He'd been to a few of these Palladium performances over the years, and the audiences had, for the most part, been in apparent middle age. This audience, though, was much younger – people the Doctor would think of as children, though he supposed that most of them had left school by now. And they were largely female, too. Of course, there were still plenty of older people there along with the children, but he suspected that a lot of the audience were only there to see the main attraction.

He settled in to watch the show, although he was only half-watching, as he was also trying to puzzle out exactly what it was that had bothered him so much about the Teddy Strong record he'd heard. Yes, the man sounded a lot like Fred Bailey, but after all impersonations were a thing, and he had himself once been known as The Man of a Thousand Voices. So why worry so much about it?

But then, he was worried about everything. He was feeling so old at the moment, much older than he looked. He pulled out his handkerchief, as he could feel another coughing fit coming on from all the cigarette smoke in the room, and he spluttered into it, trying to ignore the annoyed look from the Tiller Girl on stage directly in front of him. He found himself almost dropping off during the audience-participation segments and comedians that followed, but kept a smile on his face. Even if he was distracted and unwell, there was no point having a glum face and upsetting performers who were doing their best to entertain the crowd. So he applauded every act with all the enthusiasm he could muster, and though the children occasionally gave him concerned looks – they knew him well enough to know when he was pretending to be all right – they seemed to be enjoying themselves, though also clearly impatient for their idol to make his appearance.

Finally, Tommy Trinder came on stage and said the words that at least a quarter of the audience had been hoping to hear from the beginning. 'And now, ladies and gentlemen, boys and girls, we present to you that wonderful new singing star who has been such a success these last few weeks. The wonderful, the amazing, Mr Teddy Strong!'

The audience erupted in applause, louder than any the Doctor had ever heard. And then a thin, morose-looking young man in a suit that seemed slightly too big for him came onto the stage, grabbed the microphone stand, and started singing, a pained expression on his face.

'I used to be happy, but now that you left me, I cry, cry baby, I cry.'

The singer dropped to his knees and started crying actual tears while continuing the song, but the Doctor barely noticed, any more than he noticed the intense screaming coming from everyone under the age of twenty in the audience. He didn't even notice that Jill was screaming in a way he would never have believed of his sensible, rather prim, daughter.

He didn't notice anything, in fact, other than that the man who had been introduced as Teddy Strong, who could be no older than twenty-one and was probably younger, was the Doctor's old acquaintance Fred Bailey, who had been shot down in his plane over France in 1915, and who he had last seen in a performance in this very venue forty years earlier.

The Doctor could still remember the newspaper articles about Fred Bailey's death. Of course, young men were dying all the time at that point, and for the most part the deaths were going completely unreported, but Fred was something special. He had been singing on the stage since he was a small child, and had become one of the most popular stars in the country, playing to packed houses everywhere from Aberdeen to Aberystwyth. As he had grown older, he had become a more sophisticated performer, even performing whole concerts himself rather than just being one of a number of performers on a music hall bill.

The Doctor had encountered him a few times – he tended to meet everyone, sooner or later – and had had a lot of affection for the lad. But more than that, he'd been a genuine fan of Fred's singing. He'd seen him perform many times, and he'd bought every record as it came out. Of course, if he'd read up more on this period of history before getting stranded, he would have realised how short Fred's life was going to be, but then if he'd known he was going to get stranded on his next trip, he wouldn't have steered the ship to such a temporal backwater in the first place.

So he'd been genuinely devastated to see the article in the *Times*. Just a brief paragraph about the popular singer whose plane had been shot down by ground fire, and the address to which condolences could be sent. The Doctor had sent his, of course, but that hadn't really expressed his dismay at seeing someone so young and full of promise cut down.

And now, forty years later – by the Earth's calendar; the Doctor could barely remember how many centuries of his own life had passed – here was the same boy stood on stage, barely a year older, performing a grotesque mockery of music, but undeniably the same person.

The Doctor briefly wondered if perhaps this could be a child of Fred's, but the resemblance was too strong even for that, and if Fred had had a son before he died, the son would be at least forty by now. No, there was something else going on here. Something that required investigation. The Doctor sat restlessly through the rest of the short show, not willing to disturb the audience and his children by getting up in the middle of the performance. But as soon as all the artists had appeared on the rotating stage to take their final bows, the Doctor was up and out of his seat and heading towards the wings, determined to get backstage. He didn't stop to look back at the children, who he knew would be following him – they were used by now to their father suddenly going off in odd directions, and knew that the best thing to do was just follow wherever he went.

The Doctor barely registered his confrontation with the officious person in uniform who tried to keep him from going backstage – between his illness and his fascination with the problem that had presented itself, he had no room in his brain to pay attention to trivialities like that. But he had charmed his way into places he wasn't meant to be so often that he could do it with no thought whatsoever. He regained some focus when he was actually backstage at the door to the star dressing room. He looked around to make sure the children had followed him, and of course they had – and for some reason he was holding a ventriloquist's dummy. He had no idea how he'd obtained it, but presumably it had been useful in some way in attaining their access to the restricted area. He looked at it for a moment, confused, and then thrust it at Cedric, who shrugged and held on to it. Cedric was used by now to this kind of thing.

Having relieved himself of the unwanted effigy, the Doctor knocked on the door as vigorously as his current weakened state would allow. The door opened a crack, and the florid face of a man in late middle age peeped through the gap.

'Yes?'

'I was wondering if I might speak to Mr Strong,' said the Doctor.

'No.' The man behind the door tried to close it, only to find the Doctor's foot jammed in the crack. 'Look, shove off, will you? The boy's resting. He's had a busy day.'

'I'm sure Mr Strong will be interested in what I have to say.'

'No he won't.'

'Surely he can decide that for himself?'

'I'm his manager, I make the decisions, and I say he isn't interested.' The person claiming to be Strong's manager had a faint trace of an accent – maybe German, the Doctor thought? – and a distracted air, as if there was more on his mind than just dealing with an overeager fan, as if something had gone wrong and needed his urgent attention. The Doctor liked when he had to deal with busy people – you just made it easier for them to do what you wanted than to do whatever was bothering them, and they'd do almost anything you asked.

The Doctor thought for a second. 'Perhaps you can help me, then, because it's a business matter which I would like to discuss.'

'If it's a booking you want, you need to speak to his agent, not me.'

'No, nothing of that nature. I am an inventor, and my revolutionary new tape-recording apparatus will allow recording artistes to create sounds that have never before been heard on disc.'

'Look, we're not interested, you need to sell your equipment to the recording studios, not us.'

'But that's the thing. I have my own studio, and would like to invite Mr Strong to record there.'

'Not interested, we record at Decca.' The manager kept pushing at the door. The Doctor's foot remained firmly ensconced in the gap, and he was thankful he was wearing his strongest boots.

'But does Decca not charge you for the use of their facilities? I may be incorrect, of course, but I am under the impression that recording companies will only pay their artistes once they have... I believe the term is recouped... the cost of their recordings?'

The manager looked more interested, and the pressure on the Doctor's foot began to ease. The Doctor continued, 'If I were to make a recording of Mr Strong, it would of course be at no cost to yourselves. You would own the recordings free and clear. Having such a popular artiste record at my studio would be sure to bring it to the attention of other performers, who might wish to record there for my standard fee.'

The manager now looked cautiously enthusiastic. 'So you're saying you'd record us for nothing at all? No money, no rights in the recording?'

'Absolutely. So what have you got to lose? If it doesn't work out, you've lost an hour or two of your time. If it does, you've got a record that you can release and earn royalties on from the first copy, rather than having to pay Decca. And if I am correct – and I believe I am – my new device will make Mr Strong sound better than he ever has before.'

‘Well, it can’t hurt, I suppose. Where’s your studio?’

The Doctor handed the man a card. ‘No need to bring a band along. I have my own musicians.’

‘We’ll be there tomorrow. You’d better not be wasting my time.’

‘I assure you, time is the one thing I never waste.’ The Doctor doubled up in a coughing fit, and disguised it as a bow, doffing his hat and moving backwards. Once the coughing stopped, he said, ‘Till tomorrow’, as the door finally closed.

The Doctor turned around and looked at his children. ‘Cedric, what on Earth are you doing with that puppet? Honestly, I can’t turn my back on you for a second.’

Jill and Cedric looked at each other with resigned expressions, and followed their father as he strode imperiously down the hall, cape flapping behind him, showing no sign of the weakness that had overtaken him mere moments before.

* * *

The next day, Jill and Cedric sat in the music room, waiting to hear if Teddy Strong was actually going to turn up and sing with them, of all people. They still didn’t understand what it was their father had been trying to do the day before, because he hadn’t bothered telling them – he’d been too busy trying to pull together the great inventions he’d promised Strong’s manager. Luckily, the Doctor was not only a genius, but also someone who knew how records would be made in the future – though Jill and Cedric hadn’t believed him when he’d told them that records would eventually be made by computers. They knew their father well enough to know when he was joking, and that was precisely the kind of joke he would always tell.

But the Doctor’s knowledge had allowed him to pull together something quite impressive in a remarkably short space of time. There were microphones above Cedric’s drum kit, and the Doctor had replaced Jill’s piano with a special device which he told her would allow her to sound like any instrument she wanted, but still play it like a piano. She hadn’t believed it at first, but he’d sat down and in a few seconds time he’d made it sound like an accordion, violins, an electric organ, and for some reason a cacophony of telephones ringing all at once.

He’d also set up a gigantic tape recorder in the middle of the room, to capture the sounds. It was quite the most high-tech thing either of them had ever seen, even though they actually lived on a ship that could travel through space and time.

But still, the exciting thing was that they were going to be playing music with their favourite singer. If he ever turned up.

The Doctor was pacing the floor frantically, and Jill noticed he was absent-mindedly sucking on the end of his moustache, a filthy habit he seemed to have picked up recently, and which she could not approve of. ‘Why on Earth isn’t he here yet? He was meant to arrive five minutes ago.’

Jill laughed. ‘Oh father, you know these creative types. They work to their own schedules, don’t they?’

Cedric nodded. ‘After all, father, you never turn up anywhere on time, do you?

And you have a time machine.'

The Doctor turned to them with a hurt expression on his face. 'You know that's entirely different! I arrive at precisely the right moment, and not a second before. It's just that sometimes people don't realise it's the right moment.'

'And maybe Teddy Strong thinks it's not yet the right moment,' said Cedric, and the Doctor couldn't be sure if he was trying to be helpful or trying to be funny. The Doctor tried to chuckle, but it brought on another coughing fit. The fits were getting worse all the time, and the Doctor was no longer sure this was just the infection. It was possible that the infection had triggered something worse. But there would be time to think about that later, once this current problem was solved. Then he could rest, and oh how much he needed a rest right now. But even more than that, he needed answers. Answers then rest, yes, that was good, that was the way forward.

He could feel himself drifting away, and his vision began to blur. If he could just sleep a little while, he knew he would wake up refreshed, a new man. If he could just sleep... but how could he sleep with that infernal banging?

He came to himself and saw the children were looking at him.

'What is that noise?' he asked, infuriated.

Now the children really looked concerned. 'It's the door, father,' said Cedric. 'It'll be Teddy Strong!'

The Doctor pulled himself together. Of course. Teddy Strong. The man they'd all been waiting for. He turned around and walked briskly towards the door, trying to portray the image of health and vitality that he knew he was. Of course he was.

He got to the door, and there were two men – the man he had spoken to the previous night, whose name he had forgotten if he ever knew it, and the man he could only think of as Fred Bailey, the man he'd known such a long time earlier, but who for some reason was as young as he ever had been and was now calling himself Teddy Strong.

'Ah,' he said, 'just in time! Do come in Mr..'

'Gruber,' said Karl Gruber, stepping inside and looking around curiously. 'Odd place you've got here, isn't it? Why from the outside it looks like a...'

'Yes, yes, yes,' said the Doctor, irritated. 'We all know what it looks like. It's meant to be a bit of a disguise. It'll stop the hordes of teenagers from trying to get in when a pop star comes, if it doesn't look like a recording studio.'

'Ah,' said Gruber. 'I see. But still...'

The Doctor whirled around, suddenly feeling much younger than he had even seconds earlier. 'Wait a second. Gruber... not Karl Gruber? Author of *On the Repolymerisation of Certain Enzyme Bonds*?'

Gruber looked shocked. 'You've read that?'

'Oh my dear sir! That explains so much! Though why on Earth you went into pop music management when you had such an obvious talent for the biological sciences, I shall never understand. We must talk about your research – I have many, many, questions. But business must come before pleasure. Shall we go through to the studio, and I can show you the equipment?'

Gruber had the same expression on his face that everyone got when confronted with the Doctor's unique combination of insight into their own psyches and whiplash-fast topic changes, an expression of shock mixed with curiosity, with

just that little piquant touch of anger that the Doctor sometimes so relished. But this time the Doctor's hearts weren't really in his attempts at putting his new acquaintance on the back foot. He was tired, and he was unwell, and he was going through the motions. But mostly he was distracted – distracted by the utter lack of reaction from the younger man, who the Doctor had to force himself to think of as Teddy Strong. Whatever the truth of the young man's origin, and the Doctor was beginning to develop some horrible suspicions on that score, you called people what they wanted you to call them, and this singer now called himself Teddy Strong, and so the Doctor would as well.

But the Doctor had expected at least a glimmer of recognition in the eyes of his old friend – if this really was his old friend. And even if it wasn't, he expected some emotion, even if only a smirk at the young man's manager being wrongfooted in this way. But the singer's glassy, expressionless, stare was utterly unrecognisable as the young man he'd seen screaming and gurning on stage the previous night. Even his hair, which on stage had had the same flaming red sheen as the Doctor remembered from so many decades earlier, now looked lifeless and dull, lying flat on his head rather than having the body it had had the previous night.

Or maybe that was the Doctor himself. He knew that he had a tendency to impose his own feelings on the world around him, and he had been feeling so unenthused by everything recently, he could hardly be surprised if the people around him seemed similarly enervated.

The odd group wandered through the console room, and Gruber walked over to the large octagonal device in the middle. 'Is this...' he reached out a hand.

The Doctor grabbed his hand, wincing at the effort it took to move that quickly. 'No! No, and please, whatever you do, don't touch that. I promise you that there's nothing of interest to you with that. That's not the invention I brought you here to experience.'

'Shame...' said Gruber, looking at some of the labels on the console thoughtfully, and the Doctor quickly hurried him and Strong through to the music room, where Jill and Cedric were waiting.

Gruber looked at the two of them, disgusted. 'I thought you said that there would be musicians?'

The Doctor smiled. 'Oh, there are.'

'These two? They couldn't be heard in a tearoom. That's not a band!'

'Show them, Jill,' said the Doctor, gripping Gruber's arm as the old man turned to walk away.

Jill pressed a couple of buttons, and then started playing. And the sound of Beethoven's fifth symphony came out, fully orchestrated.

Gruber's jaw dropped. 'Is that... is it some kind of tape recorder?'

The Doctor shook his head, laughing. 'Oh, no, nothing like that. Look, name a song, and she'll play it.'

Gruber thought. '..."My Old Man Said Follow the Van".''

Jill laughed, and struck up the song, with the sound of a full symphony orchestra coming out of her instrument as she sang along, 'But I dillied, and dallied... ,' Cedric playing along on his drums, just keeping a simple pattern going on the snare and bass drum.

Gruber shook his head. 'My word... I see what you mean about your

inventions...'

The Doctor smiled. 'That's not even what I invited you here to see. That's just the accompaniment. I also have this.' He pointed at a device with a series of sliders on it.

'Is that... a mixing desk with *four* tracks?'

'That's right. And I have various other tricks as well. Like tape echo, which means I don't need an echo chamber. And some things I wouldn't even like to describe to you. Would you perhaps like to try having your artiste record a song?'

'His voice hasn't warmed up yet. It normally takes a few takes for him to loosen his vocal cords.'

'I assure you that in this case, he will sound fine no matter what he does.'

'Hmm... you OK with that, Ted?' Gruber looked over to his charge, who merely nodded, expressionless. 'Fine, then, I assume your musicians can read music?'

'Oh yes,' said the Doctor. 'Jill here can, at any rate. And I think Cedric won't need to.'

'All right.' Gruber handed sheet music to Jill and Strong. 'Give this a go'.

The Doctor walked over to an electronic console in one corner of the room and started fiddling with knobs, levers, and switches. 'OK,' he said, 'ready when you are.'

'Three, two, one,' Jill counted in, and the two children started playing. Strong stepped up to the microphone and started singing, hesitantly – it sounded nothing like the confident performer the Doctor had seen the night before. The Doctor squinted and made a slight adjustment. Jill and Cedric looked uncomfortable. This wasn't the Teddy Strong they expected. This was not a pop star. This was a hoarse-voiced, slightly flat, teenage singer not much older than themselves. Still, they kept playing through to the end.

As the last note died down, Gruber said, 'I told you, he needs a few goes to warm up.'

The Doctor smiled. 'I think you'll be surprised when you hear it back.'

He hit a button on the console, and the performance started to play back, though nobody could see where the speakers were. Or at least... it was *almost* the same performance. It sounded fuller, less off-key. Strong's voice sounded subtly doubled in parts. At other moments the timbre of his voice seemed slightly different, as if he was emphasising those parts of his voice with the best sound, and it just sounded... better. Like the best possible version of what they'd heard, the Platonic ideal of that performance. Still the same performance, by the same singer, but also a million miles from what they'd heard.

'My God,' said Gruber. 'That's astonishing.'

'Like I said,' replied the Doctor, 'I'm quite an inventor. And also a reasonable sound engineer, if I do say so myself.'

'This will sell a million!' said Gruber. 'We might even break through into the United States with this!'

The Doctor smiled. 'And that's not even the most interesting invention. Do you have another song for the B-side?'

'Of course we do,' said Gruber. 'Indeed, it's one I wrote myself.'

Cedric grimaced. 'You always write the songs on the B-sides, and they're always rubbish!'

'Oh, I know,' chuckled Gruber. 'But I've got to make my money somehow.'

‘How do you mean?’ Cedric asked.

‘Well, songwriters get paid about a ha’penny for every record sold, whether they write the A side or the B side. And so if I write the B side to a record that sells a hundred thousand copies...’

‘You make two hundred and eight pounds, six shillings, and sixpence!’ Jill interrupted.

Gruber laughed. ‘You have a good head for figures. Don’t get into music management. I don’t need the competition.’

‘But surely,’ the Doctor asked, ‘as Strong’s manager you make money from his personal appearances, record sales, and so forth? Surely you don’t need that extra money.’

‘To tell you the truth, Doctor,’ said Gruber, rather shamefaced, ‘I don’t make a penny from any of that, though don’t tell any of the other managers that. I do what I do purely for the love of the music, and let Ted keep every penny he earns. I wouldn’t even do the B-side thing, but I need money to live on. I spent what savings I had on establishing Ted in the business.’

‘You mean to tell me that you take not a single penny in commission from this boy’s earnings, when he must be making tens of thousands a year?’

‘That is correct,’ said Gruber. ‘I believe I owe him that.’

The Doctor was astonished. Everything he had been thinking – the whole explanation he had constructed in his head for all the bizarre facts in this case – had rested on Gruber being exactly like every other manager he had ever met in the entertainment industry. He had assumed that like the rest of his ilk, Gruber was out to wring his artiste dry of every penny he could.

He would need to think about this, if he could just clear his head. But for now, he needed to go forward with the plan. Whatever else happened, this was the only plan he had, and he might as well keep going with it while he recalibrated to take on this new information. Forcing a smile, he said ‘This may seem a strange request, but for my other invention, Mr Strong will have to sing into something a little different than a normal microphone.’

‘How different?’ Gruber asked, looking worried.

The Doctor had wandered over to a cupboard and started rooting through it. ‘Ah! Here it is!’ He pulled out a cardboard megaphone. ‘He’ll need to sing through this.’

‘A megaphone?’ Gruber spluttered. ‘That’s absolutely absurd!’

‘You mean the way it’s absurd that a single instrument could replace an orchestra, or that a tape recorder could turn a weak performance into a great one?’

‘Yes, but still...’

‘It’s all about the acoustics. The megaphone directs the sound in a particular direction, which aids my special directional microphones. I promise you, the results might be quite spectacular.’

‘Well, if you insist...’ The Doctor handed the megaphone to Strong, and Gruber passed the new sheet music to Strong and Jill. The Doctor strolled over to the console. ‘Is everybody ready?’

Jill nodded and started the count-in, ‘Three, two...’ She played an introduction, and then Strong stepped up to the microphone, put the megaphone to his mouth... and paused. He just stood there. Jill and Cedric stopped playing, and turned to

look at their idol, as his jaw dropped, his face slackened, and he began to cry. Not the histrionics of the previous night's performance, but the slow, racking, sobs of someone going through genuine heartbreak.

He dropped to his knees, and curled into a ball, sobbing.

The Doctor ran over to him, and held on to the crying boy. 'Are you all right?'

'I remember... . I remember everything... the megaphone... the feel of it on my lips... it brought it all back. My God... and you, Doctor, I remember you... I've lost so much. So much...'

He started sobbing inarticulately, and the Doctor said softly, gently, 'It's all right, Fred. I thought this might happen. It's going to be all right.'

As the boy who was once again Fred Bailey sobbed to himself on the floor, the Doctor stood up, and swirled round, his finger pointing at Gruber as theatrically as he could muster in his current state. 'Now you...'

The Doctor stopped. Gruber was crying as well.

'Thank you, Doctor. Thank you so much. Thank you.'

The Doctor dropped his hand, and changed what he had been planning on saying, to, 'Now you'd probably better explain why you're thanking me...'

* * *

Karl Gruber had only been twenty-three in January of 1915, and it had been the coldest winter of the young man's life to that point. He had joined the Army, as so many of his friends had, as soon as the War had started. Germany needed defending – everyone knew that the British Empire wanted to conquer it, just as they had taken over much of the rest of the world, and turn it into a mere province, no better than India – and Karl had been eager to do it. And so far, life in the Army hadn't been too bad for him. He'd been given a job as an anti-aircraft gunner, and his job was just to spend all night looking at the sky, and to shoot whenever he saw a British plane. He'd heard horror stories from friends on leave, about how badly the War was treating them, how awful conditions were, about the death and injuries, but he was sure that they were exaggerating. Everybody liked to complain about their work, and how awful the commanding officers were, but there was also glory in it. He missed the laboratory work, to be sure, and he would be grateful when the War was over and he could get back to his real passion, but really there wasn't much difference between being an anti-aircraft gunner and doing scientific research. It required much the same skills – accurate observation, intricate calculation, and a knowledge of the idiosyncrasies of the equipment he was using. Although a 75mm Krupp anti-aircraft gun with a range-finder was a bit different from a test tube, the principles were much the same.

And of course, it was easy work because nobody expected you to be particularly successful. Even as great a mathematical mind as his was not able to calculate the trajectories of moving targets at only an approximate range well enough to hit more than about one plane in ten. And in the long stretches of time between planes, Karl could make astronomical observations with the pretext of keeping his eye out for enemy attack, and he could listen to his small collection of

records, souvenirs from his trip to Britain before the current unpleasantness.

He was, in fact, listening to 'The Girl For Me' by Fred Bailey when a British plane flew overhead, much closer than normal. Clearly an inexperienced pilot. 'Even a blind man could hit that one,' he thought to himself as he loaded the gun, took measurements, and shot. A direct hit, and the plane spiralled to the ground, crashing in a clump of trees not far from where Gruber was stationed.

He'd never hit a plane flying so low before, so he'd never had one crash so nearby. He supposed he should go and check for survivors – he thought it was unlikely the pilot would have survived, but it was the honourable thing to do, though he didn't really understand why. After all, the whole point was to try to kill the British, so why it would be honourable to *not* kill one of them, he wasn't at all sure. But, that was the way the world was, and so he stood up, pulled his coat around himself tighter to protect against the fierce cold, and trudged through the snow towards the trees.

As he got near the flaming wreckage of the plane, he was grateful that the wind was blowing towards, rather than away from, the plane, as the searing heat was enough to make him wish he wasn't wearing the coat at all. He saw the body of the pilot lying on the ground nearby – he'd obviously been flung from the plane in the crash, rather than having parachuted out, and he was also obviously dead.

It was actually the first time that Gruber had seen a dead body – all the deaths he had caused so far had been at a distance. He thought he probably owed it to the dead man to at least see his face. He walked up to the body and turned it over. The face was that of a young man, even younger than Gruber, and he immediately realised that his suspicion had almost certainly been right – this had probably been the boy's first mission.

And then he realised something much worse. That was the face of Fred Bailey. The same singer he'd seen so often on that short trip to London two years earlier. The one he'd actually been lucky enough to spend a little time with. The one who had made the music that made him want to cry every time he heard it, with the joy of being alive, and that a man's voice could do those things, make someone feel that way.

He had killed the most beautiful thing he had ever experienced. He had destroyed something that had made the world bearable.

And realising that, something had clicked in Karl Gruber's mind, and he had picked up the body and started trudging through the snow, away from his station. He was going to become a deserter. And he was going to make this right, if it would take him the rest of his life.

* * *

'And I did,' said Gruber. 'I preserved his body – it was just lucky that the snow kept it in good condition, until I could get access to better equipment. And I spent the best part of forty years researching and perfecting methods to bring him back from the dead. It took my entire life, all my inheritance, everything, but I finally managed to get him back six months ago. But then... he had no memory. He could still sing, but singing on stage traumatised him – it was as if there was some

memory locked in there that was trying to get out. So I kept him doing it, in the hope it would restore his memory – and the punters seemed to love the screaming and crying, thinking it was part of his act.'

'I see,' said the Doctor.

'And last night... I'd really hoped that playing the Palladium again might trigger something in him. He'd played there so many times before, it was my last hope. And nothing... but then today...'

'Well, the Palladium is so different now,' said the Doctor. 'It doesn't feel the same on the inside. The air smells different, the lighting's different. Nothing there to trigger the memory.'

'Surely you can have no memory of what the Palladium was like that long ago, Doctor?'

'Oh, I'm older than I look...' the Doctor went into another coughing fit. 'But not as old as I feel. But I calculated that giving him a megaphone, the same one he used to use decades ago, might do the trick. Some people's memories are linked to smells, some to taste, some to music... with Fred, it was always touch.'

'So you knew him, then?'

'I did. Though not, I think, as well as you.'

The Doctor went over and sat next to Fred, who had spent the intervening time being cared for by Jill and Cedric, who had wrapped themselves in a huddle around him like a protective shell.

'How are you doing, Fred?'

'I... so much has gone... me old Mum...'

'Don't worry about that, Fred,' said the Doctor. 'I took the liberty of checking before you came over. She's still alive, and even still lives in the same house she used to live in. I'm sure she'd be very, very, happy to see you.'

'Doctor,' said Gruber, 'there are no words for how much you have done for us. I can never repay you, but if there is anything at all I can do...'

The Doctor thought. 'Actually, I can think of two things.'

'Anything at all.'

'Well, the first thing is... I think I am going to go travelling again, soon. And Jill and Cedric were talking about how they'd like to put down roots. They both like Teddy's – Fred's – music, and I think you'll agree they're more than competent musicians. Would you perhaps take them on as his band, so they can stay in Britain and have an income?'

'I'd be delighted.'

Jill and Cedric both got up and rushed over to the Doctor, their voices a babble of 'Oh father's and 'We couldn't's and 'But can you's.

The Doctor waved a hand. 'Nonsense. You need to cut the apron-strings at some point. I've been far too protective of you for far too long. I shall of course pop in to see you both from time to time, but you're both creatures of 1950s London, and it's here you need to stay.'

'And the other thing, Doctor?'

'Well... it's only a little thing. But my copy of 'The Girl For Me' is extremely scratched, and I doubt I'll be able to find another copy anywhere. Would you please record it again, just for me, Fred?'

The boy who had been Teddy Strong but was now once again Fred Bailey smiled through the tears he was blinking back. 'I think I can do that. I can

remember the words now.'

* * *

Later, after they'd all gone, the Doctor sat back in his favourite chair, and put the new recording on. The instrumental backing was different, of course – Jill playing her keyboard was very different to Ken Bradley's Serenaders – but then the voice started, 'When I look into your eyes / It's then I realise / That you're the girl for me / When I see your lovely smile / Then for a little while / I'm in ecstasy...' and the Doctor was once again back in 1914, the last weeks before the war, dancing and looking into a particular pair of eyes, now long gone, eyes that he'd seen many times in the faces of Jill and Cedric, and that he might now never see again.

He sighed, a sigh which turned into a cough, and thought that he'd been wrong earlier. Sometimes a pristine new recording was better than a scratchy old record, so long as the song was still the same. He sighed again, and closed his eyes.

And when they opened again, they were the eyes of a different face.

THE DEMONS OF DOG STREET

by Kara Dennison

Otherworldly monsters haunt a city on the brink of revolution – but are they the real demons? Join the Doctor and Rue as they investigate an historical mystery... and prepare to meet the Doctor's most dangerous foe yet!

Rue wasn't entirely sure why she'd stayed with the Doctor. All she wanted was a lift off her home world of Idrotha to somewhere nicer, somewhere with more good food and pretty dresses and less gladiatorial combat. She'd had no intention of becoming half a time-travelling double act.

Earth (New York City specifically) had had everything she wanted, and a dozen people willing to drop it in her lap. She'd even gotten the start of a new wardrobe for her troubles – a 'work expense,' the Doctor had called it, in return for her assistance rooting out an alien spy in the chorus of *Damn Yankees.* But she'd put on her new little black tea dress, packed up the rest, and walked back into the TARDIS for 'one more trip.' Just to see if there was anything a bit nicer.

She'd done the same on the floating alabaster island that orbited Venus in the year 4523, where residents spent their protracted lives formulating the galaxy's most potent wine. And in the castle of the Baron of Bloodroost, whose entire fortune could be hers after a quick wedding and an even quicker assassination.

But every time, it was the same. She'd give a little look around and say she might actually stay this time. And then he'd doff that ridiculous feathered hat and bow elegantly and wish her well. And before he'd even lifted his head, she'd realised yet again that she couldn't stand the idea of missing whatever he did next.

The worst part, of course, was that she knew it was a ruse – this bowing, genuflecting Doctor wasn't even real. When there was no one to impress but Rue, the swashbuckler was shuffled away onto a hanger. And she was left, much as she was now, sitting across from a moody, underdressed, thin-faced man with a permanent headache.

'Welcome to Mrs Voss's Tavern.' The voice to the right of the table was young and enthusiastic, its owner dressed in what the Doctor had told Rue was (minus the zip up the back) standard ladies' wear 180 years ago. 'Home of Colonial Williamsburg's finest – '

'Tea,' the Doctor said, not looking up from the parchment menu in front of him. 'Strong as you can make it, quick as you can make it.'

The waitress smiled even more enthusiastically. Never mind the interruption, she'd been given her cue. 'Now, sir. You do know tea is a Loyalist drink, don't you?'

'Yes, yes, we've all done the school trips. Bring me a *Loyalist* tea, then.' The Doctor waved a hand dismissively, eyes, still down on his menu. 'And the game pye. I could just about eat three defenceless animals. Rue?'

‘Ah. Peanut soupe and a glass of your most disloyal water, please.’ She attempted a comforting smile, but the waitress only looked more distressed as she trotted away.

‘She was just trying to play the part, surely,’ Rue said when their server was out of earshot.

The Doctor pushed the menu aside. ‘No one is ever that cheerful in the face of a political faux pas. I should know.’

‘You’re such a crosspatch today. Do we need to take you back to the TARDIS for a nap?’

‘No, no.’ The acknowledgment of the Doctor’s behaviour was apparently enough to calm him for the time being. ‘The message was very particular about our meeting time. Besides, the lady wants peanut soupe, and by the heavens she shall have it.’

Food and tea appeared to help, as did a quick run by the TARDIS at its parking place near the powder magazine, straight after lunch. When the Doctor stepped out again in full regalia – feathered hat, long wig, fancy suit – he might has well have been a whole other person. He offered Rue his arm, and soon they were walking down Duke of Gloucester Street like a couple on the promenade.

‘How accurate is all of this, anyway?’ The cobblestoned street was lined with brick and wooden shops, each with barrels or wood piles or empty carts in front. Painted signs marked milliners, book shops, and pewtersmiths, each with a reenactor at the ready to engage one of the many tour groups. Children in rented historical costumes played hoop-and-stick up the walk.

‘Decently.’ The Doctor’s mood had elevated considerably. He gestured with his free hand like an overzealous tour guide. ‘Technically, Williamsburg never went away – it’s always had residents. Students and otherwise.’ He nodded over his shoulder toward the trio of brick dormitories butting up against the far edge of the street. ‘But dressing it back up again and opening it to the punters? That began… let’s see. 1926. Barely 30 years ago.’

They took a left turn, then another, and found themselves behind the street’s historical front. Here, a few feet from the rampant history, modern automobiles were parked in modern spaces, facing modern doorways to modern shops. The window of *DoG Street Gifts* displayed Governor’s Palace snow globes and William & Mary college sweatshirts. An ice cream shop offered treats for children who had enjoyed their immersive history patiently. Between them was a glass swinging door, with no picture window or fancy sign. There was, however, a piece of paper taped to the door:

HISTORIC TRIANGLE ARCHAEOLOGICAL EXHIBIT
(TEMPORARY LOCATION)
SEE THE JAMESTOWN GIANTESS!!!!!
FREE ADMISSION

‘This is us.’ The Doctor held the door open, standing aside for Rue.

The exhibit (temporary location) was beige, and it smelled beige. Display cases lining the walls showed off the town’s most recent archaeological finds – mostly buttons and thimbles, with the occasional rusty disassembled firelock. Free

admission and five exclamation points hadn't been enough to pull a crowd; the pair were here alone.

Rue approached the central case, where the giant star of the exhibit lay. 'We here to see this one?'

The Doctor pulled a small pill case from a jacket pocket, opening it to reveal a portrait the size of his thumb. 'The Abbess will be here shortly. You can have a look if you want, of course, but she's unlikely to talk back.'

'Bog people. I've heard about these.' Rue circled the long case, glancing over the little placards dotted across it – one of which dated the woman to the 1770s. The Jamestown Giantess was aptly named: had she been standing upright, rather than curled up peacefully on her side, she'd have stood seven or eight feet tall. She looked more like a grey marble statue than a mummy, the details of her face finely preserved by peat and pressure. 'I'm not sure,' she said thoughtfully, 'I'd crow about finding one of these right at that point in history.'

'Hmm,' said the Doctor.

'Weren't a lot of them buried alive? Or hanged? She might have fallen in, yes, but why build this pretty little town back up and then risk showing this off? Especially when you don't even know who she is?'

'Hmm.'

'Look at her face. If you had a good enough portrait, you could identify her.'

The Doctor held the miniature in Rue's line of sight.

'See? How easy was that?'

The Doctor exhaled, closing his fingers around the portrait. Rue winced.

'Oh.'

'Oh indeed.' The Doctor removed his hat. 'Rue, meet Abbess Lycea: late quartermistress of the Order of the Spheres.'

* * *

'You've mentioned them before, this Order.' Rue sat perched on the edge of the TARDIS console, going through the pockets of the Doctor's discarded jacket for souvenirs. 'Didn't you just miss another of them, too? The one whose skull we found in that pit.'

'Reverend Wei.' The Doctor tapped the tip of a long ostrich feather pen against his lips, regarding a hologram of the Abbess's body. It hadn't taken long to look all of it – or as much as the display case would allow – over with his spyglass, then load it into the TARDIS's computers to be examined. 'And something tells me I'm not missing them.'

Rue found a hard candy and began unwrapping it. 'They were both dead. That's pretty missed.'

'That's not what I mean.' He began scribbling glowing letters and equations in the air around the hologram, bits of the translucent image lighting up as he did. 'I missed the Reverend by a season, the Abbess by nearly two centuries. But the Order gave me precise coordinates.'

The Doctor stepped back from his work, frowning. 'Which means I'm being led to their bodies on purpose.'

Rue moved closer to the hologram, taking in the details. 'There's something on

her left thumb. I hadn't noticed it in person.'

'Good, isn't it? Not just a fancy camera. It can pick up residual energy, for...' The Doctor paused, appearing to hear his own words for the first time, then leaned in closer. 'Damn.'

'Damn?'

'Extremely damn.' More glowing script flew out of his quill. 'Rue, I'm going to shout some very large numbers at you, and I'll need you to punch them into that thing there.'

When the exchange of coordinates was done, the Doctor slid back to the console, the hologram shuddering out of existence as he took the controls. Rue braced herself, but despite the Doctor's frantic movements, the TARDIS only swayed slightly before settling.

'Interesting group, the Order of the Spheres. We're here, by the way.' The Doctor pointed to the door, then began gathering up his jacket and hat. 'They believe all of time and space is one great interconnected series of melodies that only they can hear, and that it's their duty to transcribe it.'

'We're where?'

The Doctor pulled himself together – jacket straight, hat straight, wig curly – on his way to the door. 'April 1775. Middle-ish. About five feet north of where we started. Of course, as players within said series of melodies, they must transcribe their own lives, as well. That's all well and good unless a member of the Order dies away from home. Now the song is unfinished, yes?'

'Yes? I suppose?'

'Fortunately, the Order claims, they have an artefact that can pinpoint anyone or anything in time and space. Certain People don't like the idea of someone who isn't them having something like that. The Order said they would destroy it, so long as they were offered an alternative way of bringing home their dead.'

'Yeah?' Rue asked wearily. 'And what's that?'

The Doctor turned to Rue, eyes hard. 'Well, *apparently* it's me.'

For the briefest of moments, the Doctor almost looked hurt. And for the briefest of moments, Rue almost wanted to hug him. The moment passed, and they'd never speak of it again.

'Well.' The Doctor exhaled, throwing his cavalier grin back on. 'Fortunately, this time the Abbess has led us straight to her. Remember that artefact I mentioned?' He held up his left hand, gloved thumb outstretched. 'If you use it, it leaves a trace. We know exactly where and when she went.'

Rue stared at the Doctor's hand, taking it all in. She'd seen planet after planet with him, made space in her mind for all sorts of philosophies and power systems. But each new one always felt a little odder. 'You said the Order destroyed the artefact.'

'They said they destroyed it. But that's neither your concern nor mine.' The Doctor opened the door and began walking out backwards into the warm spring afternoon. 'At any rate. We find the Abbess, let other people fight it out, and have a lovely day with no–'

A bat-winged tiger pounced on the Doctor.

Rue pulled two daggers from under her skirt, preparing to leap on the tiger's back. But it dodged out of the way, leaving the Doctor in the dust. Squinting through the gathering dusk, Rue could see that it had a different target: a tiny

white winged kitten, darting frantically around the tiger's head like a mother robin protecting its nest.

'Run!' a voice whispered urgently, but it wasn't the Doctor's. Regardless, she followed – and so did the Doctor, dusting himself off on the go.

Their rescuer pivoted left, leading them toward a row of tiny cottages. A massive creature slid out in front of Rue with a rattling groan, forcing her to stop. It tilted its oversized, egg-shaped head down toward her, fixing her with a vertical row of three glowing green eyes. Rue brandished her daggers – which, strangely, was enough to make it stand down. But her curiosity about the creature's submission was short-lived, as another winged kitten drew its attention. She dashed around the encounter, where the Doctor waited with an outstretched hand as their third rescuer attempted to hurry them along.

'Quickly!' the girl shouted, throwing open the door of a white cottage and ushering them inside. The Doctor and Rue dove in, just as a thundering footfall sounded a few feet away. The girl held the door open just long enough for the pair of winged kittens to fly in, then slammed it shut and bolted it.

'I'm so sorry,' the girl whispered. 'They usually only come after me. You're safe now.'

Rue peered out the window as a silhouette covered in threatening spikes stalked by. 'I'm starting to feel like the restoration missed out a few things.'

* * *

Her name was Nelly Rosethorne, but that wasn't what her neighbours called her. She preferred not to go into that. She was lovely, almost irritatingly so: young, petite, blonde, blue-eyed, and willing to smile through anything. She brought the Doctor and Rue cups of coffee, keeping an eye out the window until the streets were quiet again.

'We hate to trouble you when you have so much on.' The Doctor eased into the topic, as though discussing a busy social calendar rather than a preponderance of otherworldly creatures. 'But we're looking for someone.' He passed the miniature portrait to Nelly, who scrutinised it before handing it back and shaking her head.

'Sorry, I'm afraid I haven't seen her.'

Rue held her hand flat above her head. 'Would it help to know she's seven feet tall?'

Nelly stared, then burst into a giggle.

'What?'

'You both act as though all of this is normal. This has been going on all my life, and I'm still not used to it.'

'What, the…' Rue pointed out the window. 'That? Every day?'

'Not quite like that, no.' She tilted her head toward the winged kittens, who were enjoying a well-earned rest after the evening's adventures. 'In the orphanage in Boston, it was more like that. We were always told that if we were good and prayed for what we wanted, we would be rewarded. So I prayed for friends.'

'And you got angels.' The Doctor lay on his stomach next to the sleeping kittens, peering at them through his spyglass. 'So, what do you pray for that gets you demons, I wonder?'

Nelly tensed. ‘I…’

Rue stared at the Doctor. ‘Is this really the time? Aren’t we meant to be-'

‘Something selfish,’ Nelly forced out. It might as well have been a murder confession. ‘Something I’m not owed.’

‘Sounds stupid. I’d change who you pray to.’ Rue finished her coffee and hopped out of her chair. ‘Thanks for giving us a place to sit. We feel great, and now we need to be on our way. Right, Doctor?’

‘What’s his name?’ the Doctor asked.

Both Nelly and Rue choked a bit in response, albeit in completely different ways.

‘Roger,’ Nelly said after she’d recovered herself. ‘Roger Spenser.’

‘Does he feel the same?’

‘Oh, yes. He does. He’d invited me to dinner tonight, to try to explain things to his uncle, but the guards won’t even let me past the gate.’ Nelly looked ready to weep. ‘His uncle is the Royal Governor, you see, and I’m…’

The coffee. Rue thought of the overeager waitress at the tavern. Romance across party lines, then.

The Doctor stood, putting his spyglass away. ‘I see. Well, Rue, there’s only one thing for it.’

‘I agree.’ Rue smiled at Nelly. ‘Stop drinking coffee. They’ll never know. Shall we, Doctor?’

‘You’re really going to leave darling Nelly in the lurch in her time of need?’

‘Yes, and so should you. Wasn’t it you who was cross about getting things taken care of so you could wash your hands of it and have a nice afternoon?’

The Doctor frowned. ‘I see. Well, if you’re not interested in helping me help Miss Rosethorne, perhaps you can make yourself useful elsewhere.’

Rue felt her head begin to buzz. ‘I beg your pardon?’

‘You heard me.’ The Doctor took his jacket off and held it out to her, his eyes and voice stony. ‘Here. Don’t catch a chill.’

Rue closed the distance between them, leaving barely enough space for the jacket to hang from the Doctor’s hand. She snatched it away, pulling it on. ‘I hope you realise what an absolute fool you sound right now.’

‘I said what I said.’ His expression didn’t change.

‘Fine.’ Rue spun on her heel and stormed out the door.

‘Idiot. Absolute idiot.’ She stalked toward Duke of Gloucester Street – at least she knew what that looked like. But she found her way blocked.

‘Knife lady?’

Rue looked up. It was the egg-headed demon. The one with three green eyes. It spoke like a worn-out voice box in a broken doll.

‘Yes. That’s me. Knife lady. Hello.’

The big egg head nodded slowly, and the creature motioned for her to follow it.

It led her to a cul-de-sac… the one where, just under 200 years from now, a little archaeological exhibit would start this whole ridiculous day. Now, though, it was a fenced-off campsite. The egg-headed creature let her in.

‘Knife lady,’ it intoned solemnly.

Rue waved, pulling the Doctor’s jacket closer around her as a sudden breeze blew through. There was the tiger, washing its bat wings with its tongue. The spike-covered man, mending a hat. A floating red ball with demon horns. A dog

with a skull for a face. On and on, stranger and stranger. But none looking especially interested in fighting.

'Well. The witch still lets some of the pretty ones go, it seems.' The spike-covered man regarded Rue with a sad smile. 'You couldn't make him love her either, eh?'

Rue stared at the crowd. 'Sorry?'

'Well, I mean.' The man put a hand to his chest. 'Best fashion designer in my quadrant.' He gestured to winged tiger. 'The galaxy's foremost romance advice columnist... not to drop names, just a simple fact.' And then, gesturing to the egg-headed creature. 'Award-winning author of love-poetry.'

'Wait, really?'

The egg-headed creature nodded. 'Economy of words,' it said sagely.

'And the rest of you?' Rue gestured around the group to more murmurs. Makeup artists, hairdressers, dialect coaches. All the top of their field on their home world.

'Honestly,' the tiger said, 'at this point it's time for her to give it up.'

'She summoned you all to her without even knowing who you are. Or that you existed. But that's...'

Wait.

Rue stuck her hands in the pockets of the Doctor's jacket. Her left hand closed around his spyglass. *Make yourself useful elsewhere,* he'd said.

She took in the group through the lens of the Doctor's spyglass.

Every single one of them, on a hand or a paw or whatever they had, had a little glowing spot of residue on it. Just like the Abbess.

Rue snapped the spyglass shut. 'I have to get to the Governor's Palace. Now. Come with me if you want to make a mess.'

* * *

'It's like having Father with me again.' Nelly walked side-by-side with the Doctor up Duke of Gloucester Street, the red-brick Governor's Palace growing closer. 'I mean, I expect. I was only three years old when he died.'

'How did it happen?' The Doctor paused. 'If I may ask.'

'You may.' Nelly took a breath, looking off into the distance. 'There was a fire. An enormous one. It was only ever Father and me. He was called down to the South Battery to move barrels of gunpowder before the fire reached them. But all I knew was that he had run off without telling me where he was going.

'I knew he went there sometimes. He'd shown me the cannons before. So that's where I went to look for him. He was helping to lift one of the last barrels away. But...'

The Doctor lowered his head. 'I see.'

'I tried to run to him, like the foolish child I was. Someone stopped me. But I still ended up with this.' She lifted her hair away from the back of her neck. The skin was peppered with what could easily have been mistaken for freckles or birthmarks in the waning light. But they were flecks of stone, barely larger than grains of sand.

'That fire.' The Great Fire of 1760. The Doctor knew it all too well. 'No one was

reported dead, though.'

Nelly smiled sadly. 'I know. Perhaps he was no one.'

Any further discussion was halted at the gate. A man in a maroon jacket and three-cornered hat held up a hand. 'Stop there, if you would.'

'Nothing to worry about, sir.' The Doctor gave the guard a deferential nod. 'I'm simply here to drop the young lady off, and I'll be on my way.'

'It's the young lady I'm talking to, sir.'

The Doctor looked askance at Nelly. 'Really? A little thing like her? Well, have it your way.' He switched sides, placing himself between Nelly and the guard. 'There. How's that?'

'Miss Rosethorne.' The guard ignored the Doctor. He was very good at it; they must have met before. 'You have been informed repeatedly that you are not welcome on these premises.'

'But I was invited!'

'And summarily uninvited. Please depart before I am compelled to use force.'

'Don't listen to him, Nelly. On to Plan B: we find a trellis and climb it. This place must be crawling with trellises.'

'Oh, *shut* up!' There were the tears. 'All I wanted was a way in. And you couldn't even give me that!'

She buried her face in her hands. The shrapnel on the back of her neck began to glow, casting little pinpoints of light into the air behind her. The guard, deciding discretion was the better part of valour, attempted to run; but, met with the secure front fence of the very wall he was guarding, had to turn instead and run past the spectacle in front of him.

With a flash and a pop, a creature appeared behind Nelly – a bewildered, bull-headed man – the fingers of one hand touching the shrapnel.

Nelly sank to her knees wordlessly, but the new arrival needed no instruction. It took off after the guard with a roar; and, had it not been for Rue running up the street with half a dozen homesick aliens in her wake, it might have been an extremely short battle.

* * *

'The good and the bad of the situation are one and the same,' the Doctor explained to Rue, hefting his medical bag as they made their way back to Nelly. 'The artefact will never work for her as intended. It's incomplete, it's in pieces, and it's in her. It'll do her no good, so it might as well come out.'

'Do you actually know how to do surgery?'

'Probably?'

Rue squinted at the Doctor.

'It's fine, I'm sure it's like taking splinters out. Just hold her down and, I don't know, give her brandy. Then we hand off the shards and let the Order explain themselves.'

The sun was just beginning to come up over Williamsburg. It *was* rather pretty, the sun dapples on the brickwork, the slightly overgrown garden surrounding Nelly's trim little house – the only spot of bright white among brick and brown and Wedgewood blue.

That overgrown garden was filled front to back with aliens.

'Doctor...'

'I see them.'

The winged tiger. The spike-covered man. The egg-headed alien of few words. All stood in front of Nelly's house.

'Lads.' Rue gave them a wave. 'Need a lift home? It *is* bigger on the inside.'

None of them spoke. All of them, the Doctor noticed, had a strange orange glow in their eyes.

'They said something to me last night about "letting them go",' Rue whispered. 'That artefact. Is it supposed to be able to...'

The Doctor shook his head. 'No. The point of it is purely location and teleportation. Nothing more.'

'Then she's learning how to use it.'

'Please, Rue. It's an alien teleporter, not a guitar. Unless she can pray herself up a teacher...'

The Doctor's face fell as soon as he heard his own words.

Nelly's front door opened, but it wasn't the girl who greeted them. A woman – impossibly tall, dark-skinned, dressed in orange and yellow robes – ducked through the doorway. Just long enough to show she was there. And then disappeared inside again, closing the door behind her.

'Damn,' the Doctor hissed.

'What were you saying?'

'Shut up, just shut up.' The Doctor took Rue by the elbow and led her back to the TARDIS. 'We did our job. We found her.'

Rue looked back at the house. 'But how does the Abbess get into –'

'That's someone else's problem now. I did my job. There are bigger issues at hand.'

He slammed the TARDIS doors behind them, threw off his hat and wig, and grabbed his ostrich feather quill from its stand on the console. 'I have to write a report. A very long report. A report I don't want to write and that they're not going to want to read. And *you...'*

Rue waited.

'...would you like ice cream afterwards?'

'Gosh, yes.'

* * *

Her name was Nelly Rosethorne, but that wasn't what her neighbours called her. They pointed out her home to each other as they went by on foot or in carriages. Fortunately, it was easy to spot, bright among the darker shades. And eventually, it was easier to spot still, with gardens patrolled day and night by spectres that everyone agreed didn't – or couldn't – exist.

To everyone around her, and eventually even to herself, she was simply the Witch of the White House.

RETROGENESIS, Part 4

by Philip Purser-Hallard

Excerpt from *The Force from the Future*

‘But what in the name of Hades,’ the Doctor asked, struggling to control their rebellious sauropod, ‘would one of the Kelda be doing here? *Here*, on... what was the name of this planet again?’

‘Arkos,’ Rue reminded him.

‘*Here*, on Orkos?’ the Doctor repeated rhetorically. The dinosaur’s neck squirmed and it nearly threw him from the saddle, but he held on grimly to the reins. Rue gripped tight to her seat on the giant creature’s shoulders, and did her best to resist the temptation to screw her eyes shut.

‘I mean, it’s such a waste of their time,’ the Doctor expostulated, absent-mindedly batting away a pterosaur with his vast plumed hat. ‘The Kelda are only interested in highly-evolved worlds. This one still has dinosaurs! And megatheria. And those terrifying emu things with the bad breath. Any Kelda here would go into hibernation for, well, quite some time I should imagine, until these charming people,’ he indicated the Arkosian tribespeople hurling javelins at them from the ridge above, ‘are ready for their technological beneficence.’

‘You could try asking it,’ Rue suggested, gesturing at the androgynous figure hovering next to them in its luminous nimbus.

‘And take all the fun out of speculating?’ the Doctor protested.

‘Doctor...’

‘Oh, all right.’ Grumpily, he stopped tugging on the reins, and at once the sauropod calmed itself. At a gesture from the glowing figure, the tribespeople turned and trudged away. The swarm of pterosaurs lost interest suddenly.

The dinosaur continued to lumber forward, and the hovering Kelda kept pace with them, seeming to exert no effort whatsoever.

‘Good girl, Bertha,’ said the Doctor to their mount. He fanned himself with his hat. ‘So,’ he said. ‘What *are* you doing here? Your people’s resources may be effectively limitless, but it hardly seems worth the space journey even so. This planet has a long way to go before it warrants your attentions.’

‘*No space journey was necessary,*’ said the Kelda. ‘*I journeyed here through time.*’

The Doctor frowned. ‘Time, but *not* space? You mean that this... Arkon...?’

‘Arkos,’ Rue supplied, with a sigh.

‘...is the Kelda’s home planet? Those tribespeople are your prehistoric ancestors?’

‘*As things stand, that is correct,*’ the being of light replied.

‘As things stand?’ The Doctor’s slender tapped at his lip. ‘Oh dear, that sounds rather ominous. Has somebody been stalking their great-great-grandfather again? Not that I can’t sympathise. You should meet some of *my* relatives.’

‘*There is a force,*’ the Kelda reported patiently, ‘*aiming to change this status quo. A force from the future.*’

The Doctor whistled. ‘Somebody’s trying to intervene in Kelda history? Well, that could be catastrophic. Given your influence for good throughout the universe, who could possibly want to undo your timeline? It would have to be someone pretty dreadful, I imagine.’

‘*It is ourselves,*’ the Kelda said.

THE HIVE MINDERS, Part 1

by Ian McIntire

Attention

Krif was beginning to doubt that the Swärrn Empress would ever arrive to consume his brain when the man from Primalith entered the foyer. The loud 'clunk' from the inward hatch had inspired a little confusion, but the nature of the human who emerged was completely baffling.

Arm-length feathers haphazardly thrust into the man's wide-brimmed hat brushed against the lockframe as he drifted into the room. The edges of his blue coat had a dozen or more pairs of fasteners (*buttons* and *buttonholes*, were those the words?) running from his chin to his knees, practically begging to be snagged against any errant protrusion from the hallways he might traverse. The buttons on his cuffs made a little more sense, provided he needed to secure his limbs for course-correction manoeuvres, but there were still far more than he'd need for such a requirement. His footgloves were textbook Primalithian-style, with toes completely encased within a rigid-looking material – Primalithian toes were notoriously stunted and useless for anything but locomotion in mega-gravity, so this was at least consistent.

The man jerked his head several times, seemingly attempting to look around the foyer... but it was here that the microgravity bill came due, as all the movement did was cause his ludicrous hairstyle to float in front of his face and obscure his vision. Even his subsequent attempts to claw his hair away from his eyes were abrupt enough to send him spinning in directions he hadn't bothered to predict.

A human drifting into the foyer was barely within the realm of possibility... but dressed like this? And a Primalithian? And from the inside of the Hill?

Krif watched the man angrily remove both his hat and his hair – *Oh, it's a wig. That's what they call them, right?* – and hurl them footward, shouting 'That's more than enough of that, I should think!', following this up with a muttered 'Traitors.' His seemingly unrepentant headgear thus dismissed, the man turned his attention to his environment. Finally realising he'd need an anchor against which to brace himself, he grabbed the closest edge of the lockframe, his nose wrinkling as it caught a whiff of the pale green moss wedged around the foyer's food packs. His gaze eventually rested on Krif. 'Just you? Well then, shake a leg, we're on a bit of a timetable.'

'What?' Krif asked.

The man's brows furrowed. 'Your distress call. You requested immediate evacuation, and I thought I'd oblige.'

'I didn't send any distress call.' Indeed, leaving the Hill alive was the last thing Krif wanted currently.

'Of course you sent a distress call!' The man removed a small metal discoid from a vest pocket and popped it open. 'The timestamp says...' he trailed off,

consulting the interior of the discoid. He stared daggers back towards the Hill's interior and said, 'You and I are long overdue for a chat about the importance of causality.' Returning his attention to Krif, he snapped the discoid shut and remarked 'Ah. Well, I suppose you've got that to look forward to.'

He turned and floated back through the inner door. A moment before the hatch closed, an arm darted snake-like through the aperture and grabbed the floating hat and wig. The man no doubt intended to withdraw his arm as quickly as it had entered, but the buttons on his cuff (unsurprisingly) caught on the lockframe. A few emphatically-shouted oaths followed before the man freed his arm, and the hatch closed firmly.

Now that he had a chance to think, Krif was almost offended. Distress call? He understood that a certain degree of trepidation regarding the end of his life (and Curriculum had always been scrupulous about phrasing it in those terms) was to be expected, but he'd been preparing for this process since he'd reached the age of majority, had had abundant chances to reconsider and back out, and had no intention of failing to follow through at this point.

Krif closed his eyes and tried to resume meditating. At least the man had distracted him from his earlier impatience. He settled in to wait for the Empress and her hunger.

'Oh, one other thing.' Krif's eyes popped open. The man was back. 'You *are* aware that you're sitting in the path of a huge swarm of ravenous, space-borne insectoids, yes?'

Finally, some good news!

* * *

BANQUES – Planetary system comprised of a single life-bearing world (see PRIMALITH) and approximately 10^5 artificial spaceborne habitats. Human population: ~5 trillion. Banques is also home to a spaceborne insectoid species (see SWÄRRN).

SWÄRRN – Spaceborne insectoid species of the genus *Furmemoria*. While they spend most of their life-cycle in interplanetary space, the empress of the species relies on a host organism (typically large terrestrial mammals) in which to lay its eggs. Studies suggest that the resulting offspring are able to acquire memories and information from the brains of the host bodies in which they incubate.

* * *

Lack of gravity had made Rue's typical choice of 'little black dress' slightly impractical – at least for someone new to the medium, as she was. Fortunately, the TARDIS wardrobe was broad enough to include a form-fitting black leotard that appealed to her, and accorded her both freedom of movement and an acceptable level of *je ne sais quoi*.

In response to a distress call that had suddenly cut out, the TARDIS had landed

in the rocky tunnels of a seemingly-deserted asteroid habitat called the Hill. Close by was a hatch, and for the last three days, the Doctor had made unsuccessful attempts to breach it in order to get to the source of the distress call. 'Oh, I've plenty of ways to get through that door,' he'd said. 'But all the ones remaining would cause more damage than I'm willing to inflict on these people.' Left unsaid was the worry that no one on the other side of the door was left alive – they certainly should have noticed the Doctor's presence by this time and sent someone out to investigate.

After his most recent attempt had failed, the Doctor had decided to tweak the TARDIS's sensors so as to get a better picture of the asteroid habitat as a whole. As a result, he'd determined that a lone human was holding position near the main airlock, and decided to make contact. Neither of them commented on the ominous fact that no life-signs were emanating from beyond the hatch.

Rue had demurred – the Doctor could make this excursion on his own. He'd put on an air of studied indifference, as if it made no difference to him whether she accompanied him (although Rue suspected he was genuinely disappointed that there might be no one about at whom to be clever).

He'd buckled his swash, popped on his usual attire (despite Rue's warnings against it), and sallied forth to...

Rue had actually stopped listening by that time. Listening only encouraged him. And nobody she knew needed courage less than him.

Which is why she was a little surprised when his face, wigless and hatless, looking rather more alarmed than she'd ever seen him, appeared on a screen on one of the panels that lined the rocky tunnels.

'Doctor?' she asked, venturing that the system was capable of two-way communication. Nothing ventured, nothing gained. She had just been finishing up with a routine from a book she'd found entitled *Zero-Gravity Yoga for Beginners* in the TARDIS library. Working a hunch, she gathered up the book, her towel, and her water bottle while drifting toward the display panel. In addition to the screen lighting up, a prominent switch off to the side now had a blinking red indicator light above it. She depressed the switch and spoke again. 'Doctor, do you hear me?'

This time, he clearly did, his head snapping toward the camera on his end and beaming when he saw her face. No sound came through to her side, but the Doctor's lips moved, clearly relating something of great urgency to her without realising that she was receiving no audio.

Rue had been about to break in with instructions on how to find the talk bar when a stranger leaned into frame. She'd been around the universe with the Doctor, and thus was not surprised at all the varied forms humanity could take, but this one was a little new. The first thing that stuck out to her were the man's legs. Grappling for a metaphor, she was almost brought to mind of an orangutan's arms, intended for brachiating from tree to tree: long, flexible, and mobile. But a second look made her realise that this man had all the correct human leg bones, just presumably evolved for a weightless environment like outer space. His feet, likewise, had long dexterous toes, with a big toe sufficiently shaped and placed to act as a thumb for a limb that looked as capable of fine motor control as her own hands.

The man looked no less panicked than the Doctor, and he had ducked into the

picture to point out something to the Doctor on his own console. He almost immediately withdrew from the frame, as though he had to keep watch for something.

'Sorry, Rue. Can you hear me?' The Doctor had obviously found the talk bar.

'Yes. Where are you? What's going on?'

'No time for that. Are you in the Atrium?' The Atrium was the name they had given the largest open chamber that they'd come across while searching for a way past the hatch and into the distress signal's likely source. It was a chamber about 500 feet across, with lighting strips at regular intervals along its edges. Rue didn't consider herself claustrophobic, but the rest of the tunnels she and the Doctor had encountered struck her as a little too cramped for exercise, so she'd taken to spending the bulk of her time outside the TARDIS there. It was close enough to the hatch that Rue and the Doctor could keep tabs on one another and coordinate a return to the TARDIS together, if necessary... at least until the Doctor had gotten bored and decided to go searching for the only other human life signal in the asteroid.

'Yes, I'm in the Atrium.'

'You need to get back to the TARDIS. There's company headed your way – hungry, violent, and unreasoning company. Wait...' The Doctor evidently let go of the talk bar on his end, because the image went silent while the Doctor turned and beckoned the man over to him. They engaged in a quick, heated discussion, making regular reference to an image out of Rue's view. Their exchange concluded, the man once again ducked away to his watchpost, and the Doctor's voice once again came through the communications panel. 'Change of plans. You're already cut off from the TARDIS, so head for the hatch. We'll be joining you shortly.'

'The hatch that we never managed to get open? Is that going to provide much protection from... whatever it is that's chasing you?' At this, the Doctor's image once again went silent as he hurriedly negotiated and argued with his offscreen companion.

'You can use the combination 5141013 to open the outer door – but stay in the airlock. The outer door should provide enough protection from the berserker Swärrn, but don't attempt to open the inner one until Krif and I get there.'

'5141013,' Rue repeated.

'Right, go,' said the Doctor. And the control panel went dark.

Hefting her belongings (and congratulating herself for grabbing them as soon as she saw the Doctor), Rue set out for the hatch.

* * *

The body was bare-chested, with wounds on his torso that had been bandaged, but had nonetheless bled through their dressings. The Doctor declared that the state of decomposition suggested he'd been dead for at least a full day. *Probably more,* mused Rue. The lack of response from the facility since the TARDIS had first arrived three days ago suggested to her that this man – Grem, as Krif identified him – had already been dead at that point. And to be blunt, the smell supported this idea.

Rue had been waiting in the airlock for only a few minutes when the Doctor and Krif arrived behind her, puffing with exertion. They immediately secured the outer door – and in good time, too, as Rue could hear frantic scrabbling noises from the other side.

After they caught their breath, Krif opened the inner door, and the three of them drifted through into the Hill's command hub.

'He had only just rotated in – just a month or two ago.' Krif's tone was guarded, and Rue could imagine the implications sprouting in the man's mind: Grem being dead was a tragedy... but the fact that his body had been left floating for days in the corridor of a facility meant to be staffed by several dozen suggested that it was only the tip of the iceberg. The Doctor reached out and closed the floating man's eyes, muttering a benediction. 'May we meet again,' Krif said solemnly.

Rue, for her part, took the opportunity to remove the small key she'd noticed floating by Grem's dead right hand. The hand had gone slack, but from all appearances he'd been holding it clenched tight in his fist when he eventually died. Whatever it was, it had clearly been of a lot of importance to Grem at the moment of his death, and warranted a bit more investigation.

'Come on,' Krif said, his face looking a level or two more determined than it had earlier. He opened a door and propelled himself through it, clearly expecting the Doctor and Rue to follow.

Their next stop was the mess. Krif picked up a bag and began filling it with snacks and sealed beverages. He opened a large door at one end of the module, letting curls of vapor free from the other side. Rue knew a walk-in (or in this case, drift-in) refrigerator when she saw one.

Krif froze in surprise – inside the refrigerator were even more dead bodies.

These bodies had been wrapped in bedsheets, seemingly in a makeshift attempt to enshroud them. Rue counted them – fifteen. 'How many people were stationed here?' Rue asked, gently closing the icebox door.

'Forty-eight total,' Krif said, sounding numb.

'So, thirty-two still missing,' Rue mentioned.

'Thirty-one,' the Doctor corrected, indicating Krif himself.

Krif hefted the bag of snacks and left the mess behind, checking behind him to make sure the Doctor and Rue were following.

He stopped outside a door marked 'Library Module'. 'Doctor, I... appreciate your drawing my attention to the berserker clutches. And I don't *think* you and Rue are responsible for whatever happened here. But you're still strangers here, and I need some time to determine exactly what happened.' He passed the bag of snacks to the Doctor. 'I'm going to lock you in here while I check the security archive. Everything that's happened should be recorded there. There's a comm panel in there – if you need to talk to me...'

'Right, the talk bar. Got it,' Rue said. 'Don't forget about us.'

'And let us know when you're ready to talk about this,' the Doctor added, holding up the small key that he'd somehow lifted from Rue. 'Rue found it near Grem's body, and I'm sure she was just about to give it to you.'

Krif took the key and secured the door of the Library Module behind him.

* * *

The Library Module itself contained almost no paper books. Instead, the shelves were filled with rolls of microfilm. A quick search of the area not taken up by all of this literature yielded a number of small devices into which these rolls could be inserted, and their contents reviewed.

Rue wasn't too impressed with the actual material itself – this was clearly intended to be a reference library, and thus any trashy, time-killing novels would likely be tucked away somewhere obscure, if Krif's people had any at all.

But as the only other alternative was her yoga book, she paged through some of the reference material. If nothing else, it could help to get some sense of what kind of place the Banques system actually was.

The Doctor, true to form, wasn't as patient when it came to enforced captivity. Although the lack of gravity meant that he couldn't actually pace, he'd been pinging back and forth between opposite walls of the module for quite a while now. Rue had initially let him do exactly that as a way to burn off a little energy, but she eventually realised that he wasn't likely to settle down, and so tried to engage him in conversation. She'd managed to get him talking about how he and Krif had first met.

'I thought you said this guy *wanted* to be eaten by the Swarm,' Rue said, still holding the microfilm-book viewer she'd found earlier. 'Why did he help you run from them?'

'Seems as though these were the wrong bunch of insects,' the Doctor replied. 'Oh, and it's pronounced "Swärrn".'

Rue's brow furrowed, and she looked back at the viewer. 'Oh, I see, that's an "r-n". Anyway, I'm still fuzzy on why he should want to be eaten by *any* bunch of insects.'

'From what I can gather, these Swärrn were already in the system when the first humans arrived from the Novruna Cluster. They mostly live in space, but return to environments of terrestrial air pressure to reproduce... and their reproduction cycle involves laying their eggs within a larger host so that the young have a food supply ready for when they hatch.'

Rue's face wrinkled in disgust, but the Doctor went on: 'The Swärrn young don't just absorb nutrients from these hosts, though – they also pick up on the host body's memories. It sounds as though the first few centuries after the humans arrived were something of a bloodbath – not just between the humans and the Swärrn, but also among the humans themselves. The spaceborne humans –' and here he spread his arms wide, gesturing at the library module '– would fight wars against each other, and against the smaller number of humans on the habitable planet of Primalith.'

'Well, that I believe,' Rue commented, holding up the book viewer. 'From what I've been able to tell, there's still no shortage of bad blood between the Spacers and the Primalithians.'

'Then,' the Doctor continued, 'the humans discovered that these memories were being passed along to the next generation of Swärrn, and like humans always do, they started experimenting. They eventually discovered that by offering up humans with particular memories and knowledge, they could effectively program the Swärrn as though they were robots.'

'That's... that's horrible!'

‘Oh, it certainly used to be, from what I can tell,’ the Doctor countered. ‘The experiments started with criminals who’d been sentenced to death, and the like. Once the newly-hatched Swärrn started behaving like the most violent and vicious criminals in the system, the survivors realised that they’d need to refine their selection criteria.’

‘Boy, if that doesn’t sound like a euphemism…’

‘From what I can tell, it’s not. That man in the command module’ – and here, he picked a security scope at random and waved at it cheerily – ‘competed fiercely for the right to have his memories and experiences be the template for the next generation of Swärrn. Throughout the centuries since those prisoner experiments, Swärrn husbandry has advanced to the point where a single human host can serve as the origin for almost an entire system’s worth of insects, which then act as dockworkers around the human habitations, search-and-rescue for ships in trouble, anti-piracy forces, and even communications nodes. In concert, the humans have set up an organisation called “Curriculum,” which trains and selects the best host candidates, based not only on knowledge of microgravity physics, space-maritime law, and peacekeeping tactics, but also more esoteric topics like philosophy and ethics.’

‘It still sounds like they’re manipulating or brainwashing this guy into sacrificing his life to be bug food.’

‘I’m sure it does, but having spoken to Krif, part of what the Curriculum screens for is clear-eyed understanding of what this entails and his own reasons for doing it. For example, one of the earliest tests that candidates face is estimating how many human lives they might save by contributing their memories to the Swärrn, and overestimation is one of the easiest ways to wash out of the programme.’

Rue’s scepticism must have been obvious, because the Doctor pressed on. ‘Look, I can’t say I completely approve of this, but having spoken with Krif during the trip back here, my take is that he’s approaching this with as much clarity and understanding of the cost/benefit ratio as he can, and that that’s one of the criteria for which this Curriculum is selecting. When I think about all the soldiers I’ve seen lay down their lives on a battlefield for a much more abstract set of ideals, and how few lives they’ve actually saved or improved by doing so, the equation in Krif’s case seems a lot more understandable. There’s that old philosophical question about whether you’d be willing to ensure the existence of a utopia if it was based on the torture of one innocent soul, and further, whether you’d be willing to be that soul. The Banques system doesn’t fit that thought experiment exactly, but based on what I know now, I’m willing to abide by Krif’s decision to have his brain eaten by bugs. He and I spent quite a while evading those berserker Swärrn, something that demanded an extremely high amount of skill, athleticism, and good judgement. Fortunately for him, I was there… but he acquitted himself well enough for me to be impressed with him.’

Rue raised a sceptical eyebrow. The Doctor continued, ‘You were complaining earlier about the lack of leisure reading in the bookshelves around here: I’m pretty sure all of the texts in this room are the preparation material – the actual curriculum – that Krif’s been studying for years. Take a look and see if you can’t find anything that’ll convince us one way or the other.’

Rue sighed and returned her attention to the book viewer. ‘I’d *still* prefer a quality trash novel or two.’ But she nonetheless conceded the point. ‘Well, fine.

But if those bugs come after me, I'm reserving the right to call in a SWAT team.'

They sat in silence for a few moments, Rue glancing sidelong at the Doctor until he wearily replied 'Yes, yes, I heard you.'

Rue and the Doctor had managed to work their way through about half of the snacks Krif had provided when he returned. He looked shaken, and reported how two of his crewmates – the unfortunate Grem they'd found earlier, and another named Barthul – had attempted a mutiny inside the Hub, only a few hours after Krif had departed for the foyer. Taking the others by surprise, they'd killed a good number of them before dumb luck allowed the survivors to rally and capture the two assailants. The bodies left in the mess's refrigerator were the victims of this initial assault. Grem had been wounded during the counterattack and taken to sickbay, while Barthul was interrogated to little effect. Before long, sabotage that the two had put in place before beginning their mutiny had killed everyone save Grem himself – they'd poisoned the air supply, and Grem happened to be receiving oxygen during his treatment.

'So, what now?' the Doctor asked, aiming for a modicum of kindness.

'Well, first, I think we should deal with the bodies that aren't already in the mess. The ones that survived the initial mutiny. Then... I need to get in contact with the rest of the Curriculum. One of the things that Grem and Barthul did was sabotage the communications. I have a robot working on repairing them now, but it'll probably be days before they're finished.'

'I can take a look, see if I can't hurry the process along. I know a few shortcuts,' the Doctor volunteered.

Krif nodded. 'What about me?' Rue asked.

'I could probably use some help searching Grem and Barthul's quarters.'

* * *

Grem, having only recently arrived at the Hill, didn't have much beyond the standard general issue kit that all personnel were issued. Barthul, by contrast, had a large trunk, unlocked by the key that Rue had found by Grem's body. Inside...

'Books?' Rue asked. Of course, they didn't look like any kind of book that Rue had grown up with, but she recognised the film-book containers from the Library Module. Even the titles and reference information clearly spelled out on the containers' exteriors conformed to the filing system used for the Curriculum's syllabus.

'Looks like it.' Krif ran a finger across the books. 'It looks like a lot of these are meant to replace existing volumes in the library. Others... well, maybe they're just supposed to be additions.' One volume, tucked away in a corner of the trunk, was labelled only 'Revision Index'. Krif plucked it from the collection and loaded it into a nearby reader. A quick scan through it revealed... 'They're gutting the library. This is a comprehensive list of which books are meant to be discarded outright, and which other books these –' he gestured at the rest of the trunk's contents '– are meant to replace.'

'Why? What's the point?'

Krif and Rue dug into the texts, trying to piece together what changes Barthul and Grem (and whoever was backing them) were trying to effect. After about an hour of examination, a picture was beginning to form.

Ethics and philosophy had been completely jettisoned, in favour of a considerable expansion of military tactics and strategy. Having extensively studied ship design, Krif had some understanding of the perils that fleets faced... and thus, the easiest ways to destroy them. But the texts Barthul had owned were utterly bloodthirsty, describing and advocating for merciless combat, and instructing Swärrn to not only kill their enemies without a second thought, but also to see the system in completely black and white terms. Every entity in the system was to be seen as either a foe to be crushed, or a master whose orders were to be obeyed without question... and while transitioning from the latter to the former was an easy prospect, the reverse was not true, not least because this school of thought tasked Swärrn with eliminating those enemies as soon as possible.

It was a perversion of everything to which Krif had dedicated his life – a tool to safeguard and protect humanity system-wide turned into a weapon for brutal conquest and totalitarian oppression.

Looking at other texts, it seemed that this weapon was meant to be aimed squarely at the Grounders. Plans for the conquest of Primalith were central to this campaign, along with the razing of the Curriculum.

They could do it. If Barthul's faction wielded the Swärrn in the way these documents suggested, they could capitalise on the Spacers' broader disdain for the Grounders, and remake the system into... an abomination. A generation of Swärrn set up to be the Spacers' jackbooted enforcers might accomplish their goals in the short term... but after a century or two, well, the system would be lucky if any humans were left alive. Maybe the faction didn't know. Or maybe they didn't care. Whatever the case, their plan had to be stopped.

It was at this point that the Doctor reappeared, announcing that the Hill's scopes had picked up –

'The Empress?' Krif asked hopefully.

'No, still no sign of her. But there's a ship out there, heading in this direction. Sensors identify it as the *Supremacy*.' He turned to Rue. 'Oh, and I've determined how to clear a path back to the TARDIS, so we don't wind up as berserker Swärrn fodder.'

Krif considered these pieces of information for a few moments. 'Are the communications fixed?'

* * *

Aboard the *Supremacy*, Captain Mindres checked the scope one final time before beginning docking procedures with the Hill. This was the final hurdle. They'd already intercepted the Swärrn Empress, and fed her their own template. The new generation of Swärrn should be hatching within a few days, and within weeks, they'd have enough Swärrn shock troops to begin their conquest of Primalith.

The radio silence from the Hill was more than a bit worrying, but Barthul and

Grem had confirmed that they'd sabotaged life support and released the berserker clutch before beginning their incursion. It would be nice if they'd managed to take the station to present it to Mindres, but by this point, their success was guaranteed – it was only its magnitude that might change.

Speak of the devil! He was receiving a transmission from the Hill. But it wasn't Grem or Barthul that appeared on the viewscreen. It was the Curriculum's template, Krif.

'Ahoy, captain. It's been a long time. Can you tell me what it is that you're doing in restricted space?'

A smirk crossed Mindres' face. 'Template Krif. I'm a bit surprised to see you alive. Did you lose your nerve at the last moment and decide not to offer yourself up after all?' He hadn't been able to stand Krif's smug sanctimony back when they'd both attended the Curriculum. Up until the point that Mindres had washed out of the programme, he'd always felt judged and looked down upon by everyone there, Krif no less than any others.

'I repeat, what are you doing in restricted space?'

It was all Mindres could do not to twist the knife, and let Krif know how thoroughly the Curriculum's weak-willed egalitarianism had been swept aside. *We don't answer to you, or to the Curriculum, any longer. We no longer have to pretend to tolerate the Grounders – they'll all be wiped out within a year. The Empress is already aboard my vessel, and she's already eaten.* But there wasn't any benefit to be found in gloating, however tempting it was. Instead, Mindres decided to play the innocent. 'Oh, is this restricted space? I suppose our navigation systems are due for a tweak or two. Luckily, the Hill should have sufficient facilities to effect repairs. We'll be there shortly.'

Krif didn't look as though he bought it. But he didn't have to. The template wasn't in a position to do anything to stop Mindres and his faction from carrying out their plans. 'Don't worry, Krif. Even if you've missed your chance to imprint yourself onto this generation of Swärrn, I'm sure that we can find some use for you.' Mindres pondered the prospect of a single Swärrn with Krif's memories that he might keep as a pet. What did they call them back on Novruna? Canaries?

'Mindres, cut the crap. What you're trying will fail. Grem and Barthul are already dead, and they've left behind enough evidence that everyone in the system will know what you tried to do within days. I'll make you a deal: surrender, and I won't kill you. The Empress that you've sullied with your dreams of genocide will still need to die, but you can stand trial and boast about your attempt to wipe out the Primalithians to an audience that'll listen intently.'

'Hah! You, threaten me? There's a joke.' Admittedly, the Hill carried enough armaments to destroy a ship of the *Supremacy*'s size... but nothing the station carried could get past the *Supremacy's* defensive perimeter. If Krif launched every weapon available to him, it wouldn't even scuff the outer hull's paint. Something seemed off about the background image from Krif's transmission – it looked more familiar than it should have, although signal tracing confirmed that it was coming from the Hill's hub.

Krif closed his eyes in resignation. 'I thought you wouldn't take the offer. I'm sorry it had to end like this, Captain.' Onscreen, Krif turned and entered the object behind him, and Mindres watched as it noisily faded away into nothingness. With both Krif and the object gone, it was easier for Mindres to

make out both the room from where Krif had been calling, and the pile of cylindrical objects still there. Or at least, it was until the image cut out almost immediately after.

Had Mindres spared a few extra minutes to puzzle out the exchange, he might have realised that Krif had been speaking from the cargo bay of Mindres' own ship. He might have deduced that Krif had been routing his transmission through the Hill to obscure the fact that he'd already made it past the *Supremacy*'s defences. And he might have recognised that the cylindrical objects were the Hill's stockpile of missiles.

As it was, the *Supremacy*, its crew, and the tainted Empress it carried were rendered to their constituent atoms with its captain still believing that they'd won.

* * *

'What are you going to do now?' Rue asked. Krif was still wobbling around the TARDIS console room. In the stronger gravity, he looked a little closer to what Rue considered the human norm, if a little bow-legged. The Doctor was fiddling with the controls, looking for a way to turn down the gravity.

'There's still one missile left. I think... I think the Hill will make one hell of a funeral pyre.'

'You're just going to blow yourself up?'

'There's nothing else left for me. I just couldn't face returning to the Curriculum. I've lost my chance to template the Swärrn – I'm not even sure it's a good idea any more. Maybe it's just too much power to keep in such a small number of hands.'

Rue suddenly felt the floor drop away from her. Disoriented, she nearly fell over, but the floor was still there. Krif, by contrast, was suddenly standing a little straighter.

'Sorry,' said the Doctor. 'Should have warned you. I fixed the gravity.'

'Yes, we noticed,' commented Rue.

'In any event, Krif, you could always come with us.'

'With you?'

'Absolutely! We can certainly head back to the Hill and give it a Viking funeral – although we definitely need to send that distress call first.' And here, he leaned close to the console and pointedly added 'For. Causality's. Sake. But as for afterward... You expected that your life was going to end one way, but that changed. Lao Tzu once said, "What the caterpillar calls the end, the rest of the world calls a butterfly." And as luck would have it, I offer butterfly lessons at very competitive rates. Interested?'

Krif looked at the other two, considering.

'After all,' said the Doctor, 'What have you got to lose?'

LEVERAGE

by Gareth Madgwick

‘Right, who’s next?’

Hands moved across dimly-lit panels, disturbing the dust that settled in the small room high in the city’s towers.

The face that flashed onto the screen was crowned by tight curls that drifted down to a beard flecked with white. Intense eyes glared back at the two onlookers.

‘Oh,’ said the first figure, ‘*him*.’

The second figure nodded.

‘Him again.’

‘What’s his history these days?’

‘That’s not important. But his present is becoming increasingly so. And very unpredictable, including one of his more recent missions, to the Vidocs.’

‘I see.’ The first figure leaned back in his chair, swinging back and forth, ‘Their civilisation was close to the threshold wasn’t it? A delicate stage. Something we need to handle with tact and diplomacy.’ His eyes flicked back to the face on the screen, his mind filled with the various reports he’d read from irate clean up teams over the years. He sighed. ‘Well, we’d better see what he’s done this time then, hadn’t we?’

The second figure pressed a button and the recording started.

* * *

Not for the first time that day, Kitjar cocked her head at the alien that she was showing around the Institute. They stopped on a high narrow walkway.

‘But, of course we could not concentrate all the resources on every scheme. In fact, there are many in our government that don’t think we can break the barriers of the fourth dimension at all.’

‘Ah.’ The man rubbed a hand through the strange growth on his chin. ‘I have substantial expertise in the area myself.’

Kitjar raised the parchment in her claw up to her face again. Of course. This man, this alien, was here to assist them. He was a Doctor of some sort. For some reason, Kitjar couldn’t focus on the list of qualifications.

‘You have carried out your own experiments?’ She knew her head was bobbing as she thought. ‘Your species...?’

‘Is a minor one. To your sphere of influence, at least.’ The Doctor’s eyes glanced away, then back to her. They locked on her, penetrated like daggers. ‘You are a very well-informed guide.’

Kitjar nodded. ‘A student. And daughter of the institute’s director. And I work in admin. I get all the worst work.’ Kitjar had let that last line slip out.

For once, the Doctor chuckled. ‘I must say, it is very difficult to find my way around here. Treacherous in fact.’ He pointed at the forest of towers and suspended buildings inside the dome they stood in, lit by occasional flashes of the silent storm that raged outside.

Kitjar stalked to the edge of the platform, stretching her wings out as the gentler winds that filled the Institute buffeted against her. She pointed a claw at the nearest cluster of research laboratories. Other Vidocs flitted between them, catching the winds and riding them. Kitjar wished she could join them, instead of acting as a wrangler for this strange ground-bound alien.

‘You will need a disc.’ She indicated one shape, moving slower than the others, a scaled biped on an anti-gravity disc that drifted along a straight line between high entrances. ‘We provide them for the wingless like you.’

The Doctor leaned over the edge, despite the lack of guard rail that such lower species preferred, his hands clasped behind him as a counterweight.

‘Very slow,’ he said.

‘Safe,’ countered Kitjar.

‘That’s what I said. Well, if that’s the speed that we will travel, then we should probably get a move on. I think we should make a start at visiting the candidates, shouldn’t we?’

Kitjar nodded, her wings itching to spread. She knew that she shouldn’t have asked so many questions of Professor Borak at the last lecture. This dull job was his revenge.

‘We’ll get you kitted up.’

* * *

She had hoped to soar some of the artificial thermals once this Doctor was safely trundling through the Institute’s dome on his disc. However, the alien was not content to simply take in the sights of the decorated pillars that supported the buildings. It was frustrating; had he just enjoyed the journey and paid attention, he would have seen the history of the Institute and Kitjar could have flown above him, below him. Anywhere would have done, except perched alongside him.

‘It’s strange to see such high technological achievement in a society that values form over function. It is taken to extremes. You have redundant pillars that support no buildings, just to provide an additional space for artwork.’ He smiled, slightly. ‘Function follows form.’

‘We value art. We value the things that allow us to imagine, to consider the universe,’ Kitjar said.

The Doctor tapped his hands on the rail of the anti-grav disc. The rail was one of the few concessions to the vulnerability of the Vidoc’s guests.

‘Yes. And yet, art alone has taken you to the edge of breaching the fourth dimension.’ He left a gap before the more vulgar term. ‘Time travel. How do you get there with all of this?’ He waved airily at the open space of the dome and the ornate pillars with their reliefs and carvings.

Did he not know? Had he not been briefed at all? Kitjar wanted to push away.

She did, briefly, letting her wings stretch and beat, enough to drop down off the

disc, circle the pillar that told of Henroo's triumph over the invaders of their planet. She flew back up to the disc, alighting on the outside of the rail and grasping the edge of the disc with her talons.

'We have a sensitivity to the webs of time. We can read them like we read the thermals. We can see where the timelines are heading. It has helped us to focus all our energies only on the ways and means that will advance us.'

The Doctor nodded.

'That makes sense. You are a species, small in number, with no empire, so you have the most efficient form of societal progress that I think I have ever witnessed. Truly impressive. But why not do the same with your research on actual time travel? Can you not see the shape of the future for that?'

Kitjar flexed her wings again, feeling the air rush through her feathers. It took too long to get to Professor Borak's laboratory by this primitive method.

'We are not alone. We have allies, beings that we are linked to that reside beyond the veil, inside the crashing winds that form a part of time itself. Beings that talk to us in this poor, physical and linear realm. After a fashion at least.' She swallowed. 'The Mey. They have always been the conduit from us to the future.' She shrugged, in confusion as much as anything, her folded wings lifting high above her shoulders. 'But now, the Mey are silent to us and we cannot see the way. That is why we host this conference. For the first time, at this most important time, we cannot see the future.'

The Doctor was silent. Had she said too much? The Mey were a fact of life for the Vidocs. Surely Kitjar hadn't said too much by disclosing their existence to this alien? If he could help, he must know everything.

Finally, the Doctor spoke. 'I would like to speak to these Mey, if possible.'

Kitjar jerked her head from side to side. They passed beneath a soaring archway, like a fly under a bridge.

'That simply isn't possible. They do not exist on this plane. They have no physical form, no speech to talk to you and no way to hear you. We have always known of them. They speak to all of us at once, when we need them. They guide us.'

'Interesting.' He drummed his hands on the rail. 'They sound an almost religious concept, their messages a sort of shared hallucination. Except that your level of technology, produced by such a small civilisation in such a quick time, speaks of either extraordinary luck, or a guiding force.'

Kitjar allowed herself the short sharp laugh of her species. She leaned closer to the Doctor, her beak just inches from him. He stepped backwards, grasping at the disc's rail, now almost a thousand feet above the ground.

'If they were our religion, you would be ill-advised to call them a hallucination to a Vidoc while standing at this height.' She hissed quietly at him. Then she giggled. 'But since I know they are real, I am content to laugh at your ignorance.'

* * *

Professor Borak's laboratory was, of course, near the apex of the dome. Kitjar watched the look on her charge's face as they entered the main chamber. The computers were integrated with the walls themselves, producing holographic

displays that filled the chamber.

Stars swirled around them, tiny specks of planets orbiting each one. The Doctor gazed around, the look on his face quietly impressed. Still, he could not leave things alone. His fingers danced through the stars nearest to him, letting them drift through the patches of light.

One star caught his attention, and he peered at it, stroking his chin as he did so.

'That's the one.' Kitjar knew the voice as Borak emerged from the shadows of his laboratory.

Slightly stooped, more inclined to walk than to fly at his age, he stalked over, his talons clicking against the floor. He nodded an acknowledgement to Kitjar.

'Now, why would this star be so important?' said the Doctor. He was being disingenuous. If he didn't know, he wouldn't have been drawn to it.

'Its age, position, gravitational pull, mass.' Borak cocked his head at it. 'I have spent some time calculating it. All based on the hints that the Mey were able to give us before they fell silent. I am now certain that this star can be harnessed to provide the power needed to break the barrier.'

'The barrier?'

'Between our linear dimensions and the fourth dimension. The power to travel and control time.' Borak said this matter of factly.

The Doctor's voice sounded naive, inquisitive. Kitjar could see his eyes twitching around the room as he spoke.

'Power? Is that what you think is required?'

'Of course.' Borak nodded eagerly. 'I have the calculations here.' The display in the room shifted, the stars disappearing and figures filling the walls, soaring up into the apex. 'The key factor missing is sufficient power to pierce that veil. If we can obtain that power, we will have the mastery we seek.'

'Mastery?' The Doctor's mask was gone now. Borak was already stalking away, barely paying him any attention.

'Yes. Time is a linear process. Almost as if it were set that way, bolted into the fabric of existence. But if we can break through then we can change that. We can change how history works.' The display switched again, colours and patterns swirling around. 'We are artists. We could paint our work on the fabric of history itself. Imagine that. To take the pain and barren sterility of the universe and create something beautiful.'

The Doctor nodded slowly.

'It is hard to imagine,' he said slowly.

* * *

'It is far too easy to imagine,' said the first figure, pausing the playback. 'But it would be catastrophic. Two time-active powers with different views of history. I can see why we need to intervene.'

The second figure shrugged. 'Throughout history there are those with the intent, and those with the means. The section he works for tries to stamp out those that may have both.'

'How often does this happen?'

‘Enough to keep them busy. When you think about it, harnessing a star for power is such an obvious method for most civilisations.’

The first figure tutted, drumming his chair.

‘Sometimes all this front-of-house stuff terrifies me. Especially when *he* is all that stands between us and the total collapse of our existence as we know it. Let’s press on.’

* * *

Kitjar was always nervous when entering Rastloc’s laboratory. Not the clean lines and physics amid an arena like Borak’s. Rastloc’s was a warren of rooms, stacked on top of each other, connected by tunnels and holes through the open air of the dome. Glass tanks and cylinders stood on benches arrayed all around. Papers rested anywhere they could, shrouds covering dead ends of experiments.

‘She will be around here somewhere,’ Kitjar said quietly, worried that she might summon her by speaking too loudly.

‘I always am,’ said the raspy voice behind her ear. Kitjar jerked. As she stepped backwards, the Doctor approached.

‘Professor Rastloc,’ he said, extending a hand. Rastloc bobbed her head at it.

‘Yes,’ she said.

The Doctor let his fingers linger in mid-air, before slowly pulling them back. The smile on his face froze before slowly reasserting itself.

‘I understand...’ he said, ‘... that you have an alternative scheme to open the door to time travel, beyond that offered by Borak’s plan of vast power reserves.’

Rastloc nodded slowly, tapping the glass tanks of her laboratory. Inside each was a mass of vegetation and cloudy air.

‘It seems pointless to punch a hole in the universe to make a road for ourselves. Particularly when we have communication with those that already travel those paths.’ Rastloc’s throat clicked as she stalked the laboratory, peering into the various tanks on benches.

‘The Mey,’ said the Doctor. ‘I understand that they are a little difficult to get hold of right now.’

‘I am sure we can persuade them,’ Rastloc reached towards the Doctor’s shoulder. ‘There is much that we can both gain from this, the Vidocs and the Mey. We could become true symbiotes. We can travel the timelines as a single entity.’

‘So you propose that a willing Vidoc and a willing Mey would simply...,’ the Doctor seemed to have lost the words, ‘... merge into one?’

‘Exactly. The resulting being would have the ability to exist in this realm, and also in the space outside of time that the Mey inhabit. They could use that space to simply step into any period of history, into any time.’

The Doctor lowered his head, but kept his eyes fixed on Rastloc, his expression steely, as if trying to decipher a new language.

‘What is that?’ He pointed at a spider’s web of jointed metal arms hanging from the ceiling, each one connected to a number of wires and tubes that coalesced into a large trunk that wound around the inverted hemisphere from which the arms dangled.

‘My pride and joy.’ Rastloc beamed and caressed one of the arms. ‘This is the prototype of the device that I hope to use to create a new lifeform. A Vidoc sits below, and a Mey will deign to join at the intersecting point in their realm. The two bodies can then be fused.’

‘I see.’ The Doctor turned and started to head down the aisle between the benches until he reached the larger of the tanks. Rastloc followed, surprised at the sudden interest. Kitjar gasped as the Doctor reached out and rapped sharply on the glass.

Rastloc’s reaction was immediate. Her wings flicked out, talons curled as she swept after the Doctor. Papers flew up in her wake and slowly fluttered down in flurries. Kitjar saw the Doctor jump back as Rastloc gripped the side of the tank, watching the flurry of movement within.

‘Please,’ Rastloc hissed. ‘You must be more careful. The specimens in here are very delicate. A very simple example of what I can do, but in such a fine state of equilibrium.’

The Doctor dusted himself down.

‘I am sorry,’ he said. ‘I really was just very curious to see what was in there. I would like to examine the symbiotes that you have managed to create.’

Rastloc shook her head.

‘Another time, please.’ She stroked the side of the tank. ‘I will answer all of your questions in due course. Please put them in writing. I would be grateful to hear anything that you can offer us...’ She cocked her head at him, as if seeing something for the first time.

Kitjar stepped forward; she knew she would have to escort this alien out. Rastloc’s defensive instincts towards the creatures that she created were legendary. Kitjar had rarely seen one alive; they were kept in absolute secrecy and rarely shown to anyone outside of Rastloc’s inner circle.

She was surprised when the Doctor bowed to Rastloc.

‘I must take my leave. It has been a fascinating day all round.’

* * *

It was only when they stood together on the anti-grav disc that slowly glided its way to the guest quarters that Kitjar saw the Doctor reach into his pocket and remove a sheaf of papers. Hurriedly, despite the wind whipping across him, he rearranged them out of their chaotic order.

‘Those are Professor Rastloc’s,’ hissed Kitjar.

‘Consider it a form of scientific enquiry,’ said the Doctor. He looked up at her. ‘Peer review? Collaboration?’ He shrugged. ‘Fine, call it finders keepers then. But you really should see this.’

He pointed at the paperwork.

‘See here. Rastloc was claiming to me that she was going to create some new wonderful life form, half Vidoc, half Mey. A symbiote of the two that would be able to step between this reality and the time streams, and back again.’ He tapped a diagram, some blueprint for the spider-like contraption. ‘That is not what the apparatus I saw in there can do, but I wanted to check the schematics to be sure.

It does not create a symbiosis. Such a thing would be impossible. Instead, it creates a parasite that controls the Mey. The Vidoc would fuse with the Mey but retain total control of the new lifeform.' He tapped his teeth. 'Like some wasps on Earth.'

Kitjar didn't follow the reference.

'Are you saying that the Mey would be slaves to the Vidocs?'

The Doctor shook his head. 'Not slaves, no. The Mey would cease to exist as a separate sentience. The Mey that was to be involved in this transference would, effectively, die. It would be cast out into the void, unprotected and prey to the winds of time. But their body, such as it is in their realm, would be under full control of the Vidoc.' He sighed. 'Your people certainly don't treat the Mey like gods. I can see why they have stopped communicating with you.'

* * *

The first figure reached out to pause the playback.

'Hmm. Surely he already knew that the plan to fuse with the Mey was one that simply would not work. His role should have been to try to ensure that all of the funding was funnelled into Rastloc's work and away from Borak trying to engineer stars for power. Why go to the trouble of checking the exact mechanism?'

The second figure sighed.

'This is the problem. He deviates. And then he starts to embark on his own crusades. We do have some leverage, however.'

'His family? A strange one, isn't it?' The first figure reached out for playback. Before he did so, a thought occurred. 'Why aren't we seeing his own thoughts, by the way?'

The second figure shrugged. 'There seems to be a fault in the recording. I can't seem to get it to give me his perspective, just those around him. Very irritating. Nothing I do seems to fix it. It's as if some power is stopping me from seeing what's in his mind.' He laughed briefly at the ridiculous thought.

* * *

Cawjar bobbed as she recognised the Doctor through the crowds at the drinks reception.

'I hope my daughter was helpful today.'

The alien nodded, sipping his drink.

'Very,' he said finally. 'It was an enlightening day.'

Cawjar looked at the glass in the Doctor's hand.

'You are drinking our own wine? It doesn't travel well off world I understand. A very potent and strong beverage.'

The Doctor took another sip and swirled it around in his mouth.

'I have a strong palate,' he said. 'It pays to have one when you travel as much as I do.' He stabbed a nearby platter with one of the curved implements that the

off-worlders had been given to use instead of the talons of the Vidocs. ‘And this meat is exceptionally tender. Many compliments to your chef.’

Cawjar enveloped the Doctor’s shoulder in one wing.

‘Tell me,’ she said. ‘My daughter has said you have some reservations about Professor Rastloc’s use of the Mey in her solution.’

‘Ah,’ said the Doctor, taking a bite of the meat in his hand, then washing it down with the wine. ‘I think I spoke somewhat out of turn. I’ve looked into things further. I can see, from what I have learned, that the Mey are rather more of a conduit than an actual sentience.’

‘Really?’ Cawjar’s head bobbed again. ‘You mean...’

‘Yes. A very easy mistake to make. Who hasn’t looked at some dumb brute and thought that there was some intelligence looking back? But I’m afraid that the reality is that it was simply the effect of their focusing the timelines to you like a lens that gave such an impression.’ He took a further bite, the juices trickling from his mouth. ‘In fact, they are really no more than cattle. A sound plan that Rastloc has, if ever there was one. And a good job too.’

Cawjar glanced around, hoping that the conversation wasn’t overheard. This Doctor’s views could be very important. She knew that he was a representative of a race that was already heavily involved in such matters as fourth-dimensional transportation.

Fortunately, the rest of the guests were otherwise engaged. She glanced over Vidoc scientists and their staff as well as a smattering of off-worlders, fins, fur and metal all catching the light as they mingled on this platform high in the Institute’s dome.

‘A good job?’ he whispered to the Doctor. ‘How so?’

‘Well.’ The Doctor looked almost embarrassed. ‘These Mey sound very promising indeed. It’s a huge shame that my own people do not have the chance to exploit a resource like that for ourselves. Creatures dwelling within the roads of the time streams – it is almost impossible to comprehend the utility of such a thing.’

Cawjar stepped backwards as a server walked past, balancing trays on his wings. She selected another glass of the Jarag and was impressed to see the Doctor do the same.

‘Did any other schemes catch your eye?’ Cawjar asked him.

The Doctor looked thoughtful.

‘I fear that any attempts to harness natural electricity such as lightning, as suggested by professor Ghaztik, are doomed to failure. Forwrip’s transcendental circle of meditation was very promising. Not for time travel, of course, but I found it immensely relaxing.’

Cawjar chuckled. ‘And Professor Borak’s work? Engineering stars. It is a stunning idea. But would it work do you think?’

Her companion swirled the drink in the glass, taking a long sniff of its nose.

‘I fear it would work far too well. The difficulty with stars is that there is nothing stopping them. Immense gravity combined with essentially a runaway nuclear explosion. Natural processes will hold that in check for the most part, but supernovae can be the result in most cases where you try to interfere with them. And there is no control for them once they get out of hand. You may find that a whole solar system is destroyed in the process.’ He sighed and threw back the

wine. ‘I really think that you should consider discouraging Professor Borak from his work. I’m afraid that what he has to offer is almost certainly going to be deadly on a vast scale, if it works at all. And I simply cannot see how it will be successful.’ He looked down at his almost empty glass. ‘I fear I may be saying too much.’

Cawjar clapped him on the shoulder.

‘On the contrary. I do like it when people are frank with me.’ She pointed into the crowd. ‘I really must introduce you to some of the funding committee members. I’m sure they will be fascinated to hear what your views are...’

* * *

Kitjar could see that the Doctor was somewhat worse for wear as he staggered to the edge of the terrace on which the reception was being held. Votes had now been cast by all present and she could see Cawjar, her mother, heading for the podium.

‘Do you need any assistance?’ she asked the Doctor as he leaned against a pillar that depicted the Vidocs’ first spaceflight.

‘Absolutely not,’ he said, swaying in the breeze. From here she could feel the gentle breeze and thermals, inviting her to drop in. One day, these urges to fly would go, to be replaced by the studious dedication of the professors at the Institute. She hoped that she would be able to fly forever. The Doctor closed his eyes. Kitjar looked down, over the edge of the platform. For a mere Wingless like the Doctor, the fall would be long and fatal.

‘Perhaps step away?’ She shielded him with one wing. ‘Look, mother is about to reveal who has secured funding.’

The Doctor’s eyes snapped open. For a moment, as if he had simply forgotten that he was drunk, they were sharp, like a hunter’s analysing his prey.

‘I am very pleased to announce that we have two projects that will be fully funded,’ her mother had begun. ‘The first, is Professor Ghaztik and her work on harnessing meteorological electricity.’ There was polite applause all around. Kitjar knew that Ghaztik was well liked, if rather uninspired. Her project would be unlikely to excite many.

One more project left. Kitjar looked around, the Professors and their staff had gathered in small groups, all were slightly crouched, tense.

‘Second, I am very pleased to announce that Professor Rastloc’s work will be fully funded to allow her to continue her work on hybridisation with the Mey.’

This produced a rather more mixed response. Kitjar could see Professor Borak standing with his wings folded across his body, some of his students clawing at the ground before he placed a restraining talon on them.

Rastloc, by contrast, simply nodded her thanks, and accepted the congratulations of her fellow workers. She hustled away, surrounded by a cohort of her strongest supporters.

‘She’s heading back to her lab,’ said the Doctor, from just behind Kitjar.

She turned, just in time to see him standing on the edge, high above the ground. As she watched, he took a step backwards, and dropped out of sight.

Kitjar ran, flicking her wings out, ready to dive after him in some vain attempt to catch him before he hit the floor of the dome, far below.

That's when she saw it: the disc moving far faster than any anti-grav disc on Vidoc had ever done, in an arc moving away from the tower on which she was standing. The alien on the disc, turned, looked up at her and waved once as he dropped down into the darkness.

* * *

'Well,' said the first figure. 'He seems to have managed to do exactly what he was supposed to.' He shrugged. 'A little showy, the way he left at the end, and I do wish he wouldn't interfere with lower species' technology like that. Please check if that anti-grav disc came back with him.'

The second figure said nothing. He simply pressed a further button.

* * *

Kitjar landed with grace on the platform outside Rastloc's laboratory. The early day sun and slight chill had given her all the excuse she needed to take a turn through the Institute and stretch her wings. She was glad to get the alien out of her feathers. Now that the funding decisions had been made, she hoped that things would move a bit faster in the Institute. She would drop in on Borak later. There would, no doubt, be ends that needed tidying up before he closed his laboratory.

First, and to save the headache that she would cause, Kitjar wanted to speak to Rastloc.

She called Rastloc's name as she entered the lab. No answer. Normally the professor would be around this early. Possibly her students were feeling the worse for wear after last night. They were entitled to, after all.

She padded through the glass tanks, quiet now and clouded. Nothing stirred here. Rastloc might have allowed herself one night, at least, of enjoyment. Perhaps Kitjar should return later.

Around the next corner, however, she saw why it was so quiet.

Beneath the spider-like apparatus, with its arms that hung down into the lab, Professor Rastloc lay prone on the floor, her wings splayed. She was completely still, her eyes wide open. Kitjar rushed to her side, calling her name, again and again.

There was no response. Rastloc simply lay there, breathing shallowly, with no movement. An empty shell.

* * *

The second figure clicked the screen off, showing just blackness.

'We found the consciousness of Rastloc. You can probably imagine where.'

The first figure nodded slowly. 'In the realm outside of time. In the domain of

these “Mey” creatures. The apparatus she designed was used to send her own essence there, instead of latching on to one of the Mey to assimilate with them.’

The second sighed. ‘We couldn’t miss her when we looked. She will be screaming there forever. Separated from her body. When it dies, she will go on, in agony. I think it is highly unlikely that the research she spearheaded is going to go very far now.’ He pointed at a scroll on a nearby table. ‘I’ve compiled a list of his similar actions. Reversing something inherent in some technology that he doesn’t approve of. He may have turned off his recording – I have no idea how – but this has his fingerprints all over it.’

The first figure sucked air in through his teeth.

‘We can’t prove anything. And the higher-ups like him too much to let us do much.’

‘We need to keep an eye on him.’ The screen changed again, showing a static figure of a young woman. Her face was framed by a bob of dark hair.

‘The time will come when we need to use our leverage. We just need a bit of patience.’

RETROGENESIS, Part 5

by Philip Purser-Hallard

Excerpt from *The Grand Alliance*

The Doctor had prepared the conference room with great care, to a design drawn up by one of his daughters, the architect. It was a hexagon with three shorter and three longer sides, the former taken up with pairs of huge double doors and the latter by the seating for the delegations. 'Seating' was the conventional term, of course; in fact neither of the parties of guests 'sat' in anything resembling the conventional sense.

The Kelda delegation stood, forever untiring, on a constellation of crystal plinths which refracted their light across the marble floor, sending it out in a spray of overlapping rainbows whose colours blended and reseparated in complex patterns. Their opposite numbers had been provided with recharging docks tailored to the shape of their stumpy mechanical bodies, on a dais approached by a ramp and raised such that their sensory apparatus was on the level of the Kelda's eyeline. Only the Doctor and his fellow arbiters were seated, in two ranks of benches along the third long side. To their left and right were the exits to the delegates' respective sets of accommodation; across the chamber from them was their own entrance, which gave onto the main concourse of the Citadel station.

Above them, a dome of hexagonal stellite crystal slabs revealed the night sky of whichever solar system the Doctor cared to have the Citadel moved to. Currently they were orbiting Pecnal, a spectacular ice giant, its indigo and purple bands sliced into strips by the shadows of its rings.

The Doctor allowed himself a final moment to appreciate the whole elaborate setup. It was unlikely to be needed again, now that the Kelda's opponents had objected to the finest possible print of his brokered peace proposal and had walked out – although again, 'walked' was not an exceptionally appropriate word – en masse.

'Well, *that* was a good idea while it lasted,' he heard an arbiter murmur behind him.

'Oh, I'm sure he'll let us know he was planning this all along,' another sighed sourly.

The Doctor rubbed his beard with a grimace. His colleagues' sniping aside, he had no doubt a way could have been found for the two species to coexist, had both parties been willing. The chronic engineering would have involved an unprecedented outlay of resources, but it would have been a small price compared with the fallout from a temporal war.

'*We expected this,*' the leader of the Kelda party observed, with the habitual serenity of the species. The Commonwealth had sent Aldorac, the Kelda whom the Doctor had met, lifetimes ago now, in the city of Utopolis, to represent their interests, along with half a dozen others. Their allotemporal cousins had sent a mere three armoured machines, their inbuilt weaponry fully intact, in a show of

arrogance that really should have tipped the Doctor off earlier.

Aldorac continued, '*They believe that their existence relies on erasing our history from the universe and overwriting it with their own. They are inflexible thinkers and were unlikely to be persuaded otherwise.*'

'So why participate, if you considered it a charade?' the Doctor asked, a little shortly. Although the last five minutes had been particularly frustrating, the whole process leading up to these days of careful, incremental negotiation had taken their toll on – he gave a rueful smile – his patience. 'If you believed there was no chance of convincing them, why did you come at all?'

'*Because it was not them we hoped to convince,*' said Aldorac. '*Now, Doctor, the true negotiation must begin.*'

TRAIL OF A TIME LORD

by Lance Parkin

The Doctor was led into the room. He looked around. Recognised them all, of course.

The verdict is –

'The verdict?' the Doctor scoffed. 'I know time is relative, and I know you're intent on finding me guilty, but can I least hear the charges?'

* * *

In an adjacent room, and timezone, the Doctor's companion Dattany stood in a column of light.

She knew *they* were a stickler for rules.

No one had actually said she couldn't step out of the column of light. She wasn't being physically restrained, as far as she could tell. Clearly, the implication was that she shouldn't. Her laser pistol was still tucked in her waistband, her steel knife in her boot. She had absolutely no doubt at all that they knew that, and that leaving her with her weapons was a message that they'd do her no good, that if she thought the light was bright now, then imagine it bright enough to melt her.

She wasn't scared – mainly, it had to be said because what was the point of being scared in a situation like this? What was going to happen was going to happen.

The glare made it all but impossible to see what was going on beyond it. There were people there. Humans, or near enough. A few other types of people, in similar long gowns and tabards, with larger eyes or heads or with lobster claws. Humans mostly, though. No mechanical or cybernetic people.

The three who addressed her were ancient, and she'd have called them male without hesitation, but upon hesitating, she considered the question, and they were so old, their robes so all-enveloping, their hair so bouffant. At least one of them might have been a woman. The distinction meant very little to *them*, she knew. Sexless, then.

The person who'd led her in here was younger, and looked female. The woman in a simple brown robe who, somehow, she knew was called a 'Zero Nun'.

There's some confusion. Your name is Dattany?

'The name of my world was Dattany. I was its President. When I vowed revenge on those who destroyed my world, the name of the world became my name.'

Hmmmm. OK.

And then, instantly, it was as though her thoughts and memories were boxes of documents, lined up on a row of tables in some vast hall, a team of countless junior employees rifling through them, occasionally pulling out a piece of paper,

and putting it to one side. It was a violation, but it was not upsetting, not as such, it was too impersonal for that. As soon as Dattany had this sensation, it stopped. Either they were embarrassed by the intrusion, or were continuing it, but now too subtly for her to feel it.

You resemble his wife, did you know that?

'Ha. I resembled her once, perhaps, when I first met him. My people age, yours do not.'

Dattany was one hundred and forty-seven years old. She probably looked sixty. She and the Doctor had travelled to Guanahaní with Ponce de León. A long story. Which, with access to her mind, they now knew.

You met the Doctor's wife?

'Three times.'

And his children?

'All of them, I think. It's difficult to keep track. The eldest one... changed. You can do that, apparently. You know that, of course.'

A new figure materialised, or possibly it was one of the figures already here. It was hard to tell.

Here? This new arrival asked.

'Sorry?'

You met the Doctor's wife here?

'I don't know where I am. Not in this particular room, no.'

The home world?

'Yes. The House on the mountain. Might I ask ... '

The figure vanished as quickly as they'd arrived.

You are the Doctor's current companion.

'Yes.'

You and the Doctor pursued a long campaign to track down and eliminate twenty-nine individuals. You travelled to over fifty worlds as part of that campaign.

'That sounds right. I'm sure you're right. I know you people have rules against _'

LAWS

'Yes, all right. Laws. That interfering with established history is forbidden.'

It is our most fundamental law.

'Well, yes, but all laws are subject to interpretation, and you know that better than I do, and my presence here is clearly part of some legal process. An inquiry, a trial, a deposition. Whatever it is, whatever stage it is at, you are clearly unsure if I violated your laws – if you were sure I had, you would skip to the punishment. So, you are trying to ascertain some of the facts.'

...

'Good. And we were operating perfectly within the letter of the law.'

We will be judges of –

'You are aware of the war? Space War II. Instigated by the leaders of the Civic Legion.'

The causes of any event are complex.

'Of course. Please give me your assessment of the Civic Legion.'

They were fascist expansionists operating on a galactic scale.

'Couldn't have put it better myself. It's simple enough: a small cabal of generals, political leaders, and scientists took control of a cluster of my galaxy,

and then used its resources to launch swift, unprovoked, sadistic attacks on the civilian populations of the rest of the galaxy.'

Including Dattany. One of the first worlds to be attacked.

'Including *my* home world, yes.'

You are the last survivor of your civilisation.

'No, not quite. Around a hundred of us survived.'

You sought vengeance.

'The war was over, the victory over the Civic Legion was decisive. Most of the cabal had been killed in the fighting, twenty-nine remained.'

They fled.

'They did.'

You tracked them down.

'Every last one of them.'

And killed them.

'Five had died before we got to them. Three died by my hand, yes. The rest died... as a result of our actions.'

A rumble of discontent.

'This was justice!' she declared. 'Twenty-nine vile beings, war criminals. Tyrants. Bringers of death and misery across an entire galaxy. You think I'm sorry? I regret their deaths. I do. I am proud that I was able to take the burden of those deaths from others. I fought monsters. Perhaps that made me a monster. I am prepared to justify my actions.'

This is not some human select committee meeting. This is not deciding how we fine you or confine you.

'It isn't?'

The fate of twenty-nine mortal beings is not significant in the grand scheme of things.

'The galaxy,' she spat, '*is* the grand scheme of things.'

No. Not at the scale we operate on. The scars will heal, although some will take aeons.

'When I first met the Doctor, he was working on your behalf to help some of those scars heal. He was helping efforts to rebuild, to find new homes for refugees.'

We are not cruel. While we do not interfere in the course of events, we do, on occasion, ensure the smooth running of those events. We did not alter history.

'The Doctor did not alter history,' she asserted.

How can you say that?

For the first time, she could tell which individual was speaking. One of the three elders, the one to the left of the group.

'You have records? Your records show that those members of the cabal went to ground after the war. No records survived of them following the end of the war. Nothing definitive.'

That is correct.

'They disappeared from history.'

That is correct.

'Then we did not alter history.'

The Doctor intervened.

'The Doctor did not alter history. They had already removed themselves from history. We simply... formalised that status. Wrote history in pen, not pencil.'

She could hear them mumbling to each other. But the tone... it was unmistakable. They were, deeply reluctantly, conceding the point. Thankfully they hadn't asked about –

Shit.

Halkra Vak?

Shit.

The last name on the list. Halkra Vak. An insect ultraphysicist, an exile from a eusocial race who'd built itself a hive of AIs to live among. An individual who was also a civilisation. Its body had been found after the War, killed by poison injection, self-administered. But it was a trick. Its consciousness, the consciousness of the whole hive, had been uploaded to a bracelet; the bracelet allowed Halkra Vak to drive the body of whoever wore it, like a vehicle. And it had fled the scene, gone to ground at Temprox, the corporation that designed and built time travel –

Restlessness, now.

'History was not altered,' she told them.

Tell us what happened.

* * *

A robot's head exploded.

Dattany holstered the weapon. 'Clear.'

The Doctor hurried in, stepped over the remains of the guard.

'That's not Vak,' she said.

'I didn't say it was. Its last vestige is in this room somewhere, though.'

'Why can't we detect it? I thought we'd got good at that.'

The Doctor was looking around the laboratory, taking it all in. At a glance, he pieced it all together, knew what it was building here.

He examined a stack of punchcards, thoughtfully, turned away, indicated the mainframe that filled the back wall. 'Vak's not in there, either.'

The Doctor never looked agitated. When he was worried, he overcompensated. Strutted a little more, got a little more theatrical. He was practically handing out souvenir programmes and choc ices right now.

'What?' she asked.

'The rest of the cabal... they were wicked, they were ruthless, but all they did was find ways to kill. They thought they were being imaginative, but... well, there are only so many ways to die.'

'And Halkra Vak was different?'

'It was truly dangerous.'

'Because of its nature? As a machine intelligence? Because it was functionally immortal?'

The Doctor scoffed. 'Everyone's immortal until they're not.'

They'd both been searching the room this whole time. Scientific equipment, none of it powered up, but all of it intact.

'Halkra Vak did something new,' the Doctor said. 'Something even my people didn't know could be done.'

He'd found a stack of plastic sheets, etched with lines and curves. Notes?

'It found a way to bend hyperspace. Just a tiny amount, but enough to mean that the Legion ships could arrive a day earlier than they should have, and that the ships of their opponents arrived a day later.'

'That's how they could launch so many surprise attacks. And why we could never muster a response.'

'It was the one discovery that made the cabal's war on a galactic scale possible.'

The Doctor lit his pipe, and puffed on it.

* * *

Wait.

Dattany hadn't been thinking about her and the Doctor in Halkra Vat's laboratory at Temprox, or at least she had not been in charge of the replaying of her memories. Whoever had called 'Wait' had not been talking to her.

A pause.

Dattany wondered if she should say something. Best not to, she decided. Answer the questions they ask, but don't volunteer any information.

I mean... technically.

She didn't think she was meant to have heard that. There was a discussion going on, with the microphones – or whatever gods used instead of microphones – turned off.

'It found a way to bend hyperspace. Just a tiny amount, but enough to mean that the Legion ships could arrive a day earlier than they should have, and that the ships of their opponents arrived a day later.'

The Doctor's voice boomed through the chamber, and it was always so reassuring. It was only a recording, or an echo. Even so, it imposed itself on the room, felt bigger and warmer than anything else.

'And it had fled the scene, gone to ground at Temprox, the corporation that designed and built time travel capsules for Anti-Varnax's scientific and historical research into Realm Four.'

That was her voice, from just now. Except she hadn't finished the sentence. It was how she would have finished it.

Anti-Varnax activities fully authorised by the High Council. Our observers have full access. No proliferation of time travel technology, a new voice announced.

There was a bustle of activity in the darkness around Dattany.

If Space War II was... I know, I know, I'm just saying if it was...

* * *

In a backroom:

'Hrumph.'

'I appreciate you want to find the Doctor guilty, but unfortunately he is not guilty.'

'Halkra Vak was the last of its kind. Dattany is about to tell us that the Doctor

drops some ash from his pipe on that pile of punchcards, and that the punchcards start to burn, and the Doctor then announces that the cards contain the last version of Halkra Vak's program, and they watch them burn, and she smiles for the first time in a century. But if Halkra Vak is the last of its kind, and the Doctor destroys it, then that's genocide.'

'It's not genocide. Halkra Vak was not alive, he was an artificial simulation. The simulation wasn't running, it was stored on the cards. If we're going to get all pedantic about it, then burning those punchcards ended a potential cybernetic swarm event, that –'

'All right, all right. Not genocide.'

'And I still say that –'

'Here we go again.'

'Look, I appreciate you like quibbling, but if the Civic Legion was inflecting hyperspace –'

'Which it clearly was.'

'– which all the evidence points to, and those inflections in hyperspace caused warships to arrive at different times, then –'

'I know what you're going to say, and you're wrong.'

'What was I going to say?'

'You were going to say it's a Time War.'

'Hmmmm. Yes. Yes, I was. Because it is a Time War. And if the Doctor believed that, then –'

'It's not a Time War. Heavens below, you're seriously calling speeding up or slowing down the arrival of combat units "Time War"?'

'Yes. If they were *meant* to arrive a day later, then it's a history change, and so –'

'Utterly absurd. If someone slashes the tyres of a general's ground car, delaying its arrival at the Front by an hour, would you call that "Time War"? What if the general orders his driver to increase the car's velocity or take a short cut? "Time War"?'

'Hypothetically, if it *was* Time War, then what would the Doctor's duties be?'

Everyone in the room started shouting.

When that died down, a concession. '*If* it was a Time War, it would be the Doctor's solemn and overriding duty to put all the time travel technology used to wage war beyond use.'

'Thank you. But there's more, isn't there?'

'It would be the Doctor's solemn and overriding duty to track down those who might still possess time travel technology, or the knowledge to create said technology, and to prevent them from doing so.'

'Which is precisely what he did.'

'Hrumph.'

* * *

'Which is precisely what I did!' the Doctor proclaimed.

That had shut them up.

* * *

‘As we tracked down the members of the cabal,’ Dattany said, ‘it became clear that some of them must be communicating with each other. We thought it was via proxies, via mutual associates. Operating as cells, so that if one was caught, he, she, they, or it couldn’t expose the entire network.’

They had plans?

‘We never learned the full extent of the plans. And you know the Doctor. He likes plans. He always has plans, he always seeks them out. He’s very good at working out plans. But he couldn’t work this one out. All the attempts to actually find the middlemen they were using... most of them had messengers, third parties who were travelling around, and sometimes they used burner androids to talk to people.’

Former cabal?

‘Well that was the thing: we just could not find any evidence, at all, that any of the members of the cabal were talking to each other. They’d gone into hiding, and all of them had some scheme going. They’d been powerful people, and they still wanted the trappings of that, so they got involved in organised crime, local politics of worlds with scarce resources, arms dealing, religious cults, high finance. That sort of thing.’

The Doctor suspected there was more to it? That the twenty-nine members of the cabal were in an active conspiracy.

‘We both thought it.’

We’re not interested in what you thought. The Doctor thought it?

Dattany rolled her eyes. ‘Sure. The Doctor thought that they had to be communicating. There had to be an overarching plan. There was just no evidence of it.’

* * *

‘Then,’ the Doctor said, ‘and it took me until the twenty-first cabal member I tracked down, I admit I was very slow on the uptake, I worked out how. I realised all of them had pieces of technology using Halkra Vak’s consciousness. That they were using it as a Sub-Wave network. That every individual scam and scheme the other twenty-eight were operating was part of an effort to funnel resources into Halkra Vak’s time travel research. Halkra Vak was the key to it all.’

They watched the hypotheticals unroll. Halkra Vak building a time machine on Temprox, using it to travel back to prevent the Civic Legion’s defeat by supplying a feed of data from the future, then supplies of weapons and other resources. It would have worked. It ought to have been unstoppable.

The Doctor tried not to look smug. ‘The plain fact of the matter is that I was placed in an impossible situation. If I intervened, I would break the law of non-intervention. But, I thought, if I let history run its course, then history... well, history would *not* have run its course, would it? The timeline would have been

seriously disrupted. I managed to contrive a – rather elegant, you have to admit – sequence of events by which I neither intervened, nor allowed a disruption to the web of time. Eliminate the people in their hideouts, break the network.'

Hrumph.

'I take that to mean "Hrumph, not guilty, you're free to go"?'

* * *

'He's got us.'

All but one of them conceded the point.

'I'll release his TARDIS. Release him. The girl has to go back to her native time, though, wipe her memory, he doesn't get to keep her.'

'She doesn't have a native time, her planet was destroyed. She had already tracked down a member of the cabal when she met the Doctor. We can't put her back without the risk she'll disrupt... well, her own success. The safest place to put her is... with the Doctor.'

'Unbelievable. We're just letting them both go?'

One of them was smiling, though.

'If I might make a suggestion, you're all overlooking what Dattany said.'

'We are?'

'She met the Doctor's wife.'

'And?'

'Where?'

'Does it matter where?'

'I will ask her.'

'Come back here, you –'

They absorbed the new information.

'He brought an alien to the home world.'

The mood had lifted in the room.

* * *

The verdict is guilty. The charge is that you have consorted with aliens. Brought one through the barrier between the home world and the wider universe.

The Doctor, perhaps for the first time in this life, was wide-eyed, caught out.

'Dattany?' he said. 'Where is she? What have you done with her?'

That no longer concerns you.

'Oh, it concerns me –' the Doctor held out his hands. 'She just helped me end a Time War. Please, whatever you do to me... leave Dattany out of it.'

She will not be punished.

A pause.

We will find a way to reward her.

The Doctor nodded. 'Thank you.'

You, however –

'I know what this is,' the Doctor said.

You do, do you?
‘As above, so below. A cabal down there, a cabal up here.’
What does he mean?
Don’t listen to him!
Why not?
I’m not part of a cabal.
Am I? Am I part of a cabal? Wouldn’t I know?
Do not listen to him.
Is someone trying to start a Time War?
I said do not listen to him.
‘I know your name. I know your plan.’
You know nothing, Doctor.
‘I will stop you.’
Not in this life.
Wait. What’s happening? Who’s saying that?
Doctor, what’s happening?
Who is that?
Who’s?
Golden light was bathing the Doctor. He was smiling.
‘No. Not in this life.’
Doctor?
Who?

IN THE LAND BEYOND THE RIVER

by Aditya Bidikar

There is a river that flows through our land, through the grass and through the dirt. Beyond that river, there is the land of the dead.

In the same way, there is a river in the sky, that flows through the stars and through time. There is a ship that sails that river, and it visits lands beyond our imagination.

One day, when I was a younger and more playful woman, between my second and third husbands, one day this ship fell from the river in the sky, and a god fell with it. This is the story of how I met that god, and of how the Doctor lost his ship and then got it back.

The day I met the Doctor, I was wandering the land, looking for a story to be a part of.

First I asked the sun. Sun, I said, what are you doing today? And the sun said to me to go away.

I don't want to speak with you, he said. The last time I spoke with you, you stole my billy goat chariot, and now it takes me a whole day to travel the sky.

I said to him, then, where is your sister, the moon? Perhaps she will want to talk to me. And he said, I haven't seen the moon in a long time. When she last met you, you gave her stains on her face. She is now so bereft that she cannot show her face in the day any longer.

Well, I said to the sun, give her my regards and tell her she and I shall meet some night and we shall have another story.

The sun, he rose even higher into the sky to get away from me, and as the day got hotter, I walked into the forest, where the woods give shade and the water is cool and fresh.

There I saw the fox drinking from the watering hole. I walked up behind him, and I spoke. Fox, I said, what are you doing today?

The fox saw my reflection in the water, and he leapt up into the air, his tail bushy from fright. As he ran away from me, I shouted, Fox, why are you frightened of me?

You are only trouble, the fox said. I don't want to speak with you. This is why, to this very day, the fox has a bushy tail.

I walked out of the forest feeling sad and alone as no one was speaking with me, and there I saw a man. At least, I think it was a man, as he had a beard, but his dress was most colourful, and his eyes had a softness in them, like a woman or a young boy.

'Excuse me,' said the Doctor – for it was he – 'I wonder if you can help me.'

I was still feeling sad and alone, so I said to this man, If you're looking for the watering hole, it is in the forest, back that way. And with that, I walked away from him.

But the Doctor ran behind me, and he said, 'No, that's not it. I'm looking for my ship, and for my companion. I seem to have lost them both.'

A story! I thought to myself. *Finally the day is improved.*

So I turned to this man, and I said, I will help you find your ship and your companion. Where did you last see them? In the river?

'It's not that sort of ship,' he said. 'But let me show you where I left them.'

The man and I started walking, and to pass the time, I asked him, Man, what is your name?

'People call me the Doctor,' he said.

And what is that, I asked him. Dok-torr.

'It's like a healer, or...' he said, gesturing with his hand, '...someone who cures people.'

That is a *profession*, Dok-torr. A *calling*. How is it a name?

'Well,' the Doctor said. 'If I understand this place correctly, that is precisely why it is a name.'

A-ha, I said. You have me there. So you are a story that helps people.

'That,' the Doctor said, 'sounds like a rhetorical question if I've ever heard one.'

Before I could speak further, he pointed to a pattern in the dirt. 'This,' he said, 'is where my ship was.'

That is quite far from the river, I said.

The Doctor waved his arms impatiently. 'It's not that kind of ship. We came... from the sky. This is where our ship landed, and then it was taken, along with my companion.'

I gazed at the pattern in the dirt. It was a few circles and a shape of a hexagon around it. *A ship that came from the sky*, I thought to myself, saying nothing out loud. *This is not a story, this is a god that walks like a man. It is just as well I know others like him.*

How were they taken? I asked him.

He hesitated. 'This is the strange bit,' he said. 'We were exploring this place. My companion saw a man in the distance, so she went to speak with him. I'm not sure what she said to him, but the next time I turned, he'd picked her up and put her over his shoulder.'

He looked at me with expectation. Go on, I said.

'And then, he saw my ship, and from the distance, he picked it up and put it in his bag.'

I nodded.

'You don't find that strange?'

If he was at a distance, I said, then your ship was surely very small to him. And if he was far enough away, he could put it in his pocket. Just be thankful you were not in it.

'And then,' the Doctor continued, after shaking his head, 'he started walking away again. And I ran after him, but as fast as I tried running, I couldn't catch up with him, even though he was just walking.'

Aha, I said.

'Do you know who it was?' the Doctor asked.

I am not sure, I said, for I have not met this man. But I have some ideas. Where did he take them?

'He got to the river,' the Doctor continued, pointing towards the river, 'and there, he got on a boat, and crossed over to the other side. I tried swimming after them, but for some reason, every time I got to the other side, I was... still on this

side.'

Ah, you silly man, Doctor, I said to him. On the other side of the river is the land of the dead. You cannot travel to the land of the dead while you are still alive.

'But...' the Doctor said, then stopped. 'What?'

I raised an eyebrow, and waited for a question.

'How did he carry my companion there? She wasn't dead.'

That is what we must find out, Doctor.

'And how do we do that?'

Well, I said, first we must die.

With that, we began to walk to the river.

'And this is not a problem for you? Dying?'

Every problem, Doctor, carries within it the solution. When you are in a story, you must not worry about these things.

The Doctor seemed satisfied with this answer.

And then, as we walked to the river, we passed the fox, and the fox told the Doctor to run from me, and when the sun came down again and saw us, the sun told the Doctor to run from me, but the Doctor only smiled at them.

When we reached the river, I dove in first, and the Doctor behind me. To swim, I said to him, you must first sink.

And then we drowned, and as we drowned, we died, and this time when we reached the shore, we were in the land of the dead.

'It doesn't look any different,' he said to me.

It is only another flavour, I replied. You might notice things, or you might not. It's an ever-changing land, like the land of the living.

'Where do we go now?' he said.

I hesitated there.

I've never been here before. Usually, only Death brings you here.

'You mean,' he said, 'my companion ...'

I am afraid she is dead, I said. But now, so are you.

He smiled. 'How about that.'

The dead have villages, just like the living. They too have the rest of their time to be getting along with.

So we decided it would be best to find the village of the dead, and then ask where we might find Death himself.

We reached the village, and found all our ancestors there. From the very first man and the very first animal, to the people of our last generations, the people who had died in recent times.

As we reached the centre of the village, we found that there was a festival, a large fire around which all of the dead, they were dancing. In the middle of the fire, burning but not burnt, there was a large woman sitting on a throne, laughing as she watched all of the dancing.

Mother, I said to her, for she was the first human that all of humanity was celebrating, do you know where we might meet Death himself, for we have a question to place before him.

'That's my ship,' said the Doctor beside me, in a soft voice.

What is your ship? I asked.

He pointed to a small pendant around the first Mother's neck, a little bauble

hanging from a burning rope. It was round, but every aspect of it was cut in the shape of a hexagon.

Don't be a fool, I said, that is not a ship.

'Well,' he said, 'it doesn't *always* look like that.'

Does it ever look like a ship, I asked.

'Not usually,' he said.

Then how is it a ship, you foolish man?

The great Mother interrupted. What is this question you must put to Death, my child?

'I have a companion,' the Doctor said to her, 'that was brought here by someone, in a sack. I wish to take her back across the river.'

The mighty Mother of mankind laughed, and all her children laughed with her.

If it were possible to cross the river to the land of the living, my child, do you not think I would like to meet all the descendants I have made, instead of waiting for them to arrive here so we can together celebrate that we once lived?

Bountiful Mother, I said, do you know who I am?

I do, she said. There are many of my children who come to me and complain of you once they are dead.

I'm just happy they remember me, I said. But if you know me, then would you care to make a wager? If I can convince Death himself to give you leave to visit us across the river, will you give me that trinket you wear across your neck?

The loving Mother touched her necklace with its precious bauble. This was a gift from Death, she says, that he gave me in thanks for all the cargo I have given him in all the years. But if you, my daughter, can fool Death, then yes, I will happily part with it.

Doctor, I said, let us fly now.

'But wait,' he said. 'I want to talk to the mother of all humanity!'

There will be enough time for that later, I said. Besides, she is merely a woman.

We went in the direction the ancient mother told us – the Doctor running, and I walking, and within some time we were far away from the village, and nearing the figure of Death, walking away from us with his sack over his shoulder.

Run as we might, we could not catch up to Death, who continued to walk at a steady gait. I lengthened my legs, as my natural form allows, and I ran ahead of the Doctor, and yet, Death remained on the horizon, never in our grasp.

I stopped, letting the Doctor catch up, and we watched Death walk, wondering what to do.

'Call out to him,' the Doctor said. 'Maybe he'll come meet us.'

I don't know if you have noticed, Doctor, but everyone runs away from me. They want no part of a story with me in it.

'But,' the Doctor said, 'Death doesn't know that, does he?'

So I called out to Death.

Death, I said, I wish to speak with you!

Death turned. Who are you, he said.

I am one of the living, I said, who is now one of the dead.

I don't remember bringing you here.

That is why I wish to speak with you, Death. Why don't you lay down your burden for a while, and we shall have a talk?

We walked with Death to the shade of a tree, and there, Death lay down his

sack, and sat back against the tree. I sat down with him, and I brought out the food I had made in the morning – a ball of rice, with some nuts and berries and some dried meat. And there we sat, the three of us, the Doctor, Death and I, and we shared a meal.

I looked at the Doctor, expecting impatience, but he merely shrugged. 'These things must take their time.'

And as he spoke, there came a voice from Death's sack. 'Doctor,' the voice said. 'Is that you?'

'Yes, my dear. Now let's see what can be done, shall we?'

She started to speak again. 'Doctor,' she said. 'I don't understand this place –'

'Asimah,' the Doctor said, interrupting her. 'You need to be quiet now. We will talk soon.' And Asimah listened to his command.

Death, I said to the old man who was Death. What are you doing with this child in your sack? Why have you not sent her to the village of the dead?

Death shrugged and threw up his hands.

I tried to do the same, he said. But she has no family in the village, and so nobody has built her a house to live in! Where would I have left her, to be alone and uncared for? It is better to carry her around till her family joins her in the land of the dead.

'Death,' the Doctor said, 'does she not take up too much room in your little sack? If you carry her around all the time, there is no place left for anyone else!'

What do you mean? Death said. I can fit several people in the sack! Why, I can fit all of the dead in the sack.

'You mean to say,' the Doctor continued, 'that if we climb into the sack, not only would all three of us fit in there, but you would be able to carry us around?'

Of course, Death said. It would be child's play!

The Doctor scoffed. 'I don't believe you!'

Come then, Death said, and he got up and opened the sack. Before the Doctor's companion could say anything, the Doctor leapt into the sack, and then beckoned me in as well.

With a certain reluctance, I stepped into the sack, and then Death closed the neck of the sack, and he hefted it mightily onto his shoulder, and he set off into the land.

See, he said, now nobody but me can open this sack. You are safe in there!

'How are you doing?' the Doctor said to his companion.

'I'm fine,' she said, 'just a bit shaken. I fainted from the heat, and the next thing I know, I wake up in a bloody sack!'

'Ah,' the Doctor said. 'I'm afraid that was when you *died*, Asimah.'

The girl stared at him. 'Luckily for us,' the Doctor continued, 'that doesn't seem to mean quite the same thing here as it might elsewhere. Because, you see,' he said, smiling, 'I'm dead too!'

Doctor, I said. What is this you are doing?

'You see,' the Doctor said, 'you mentioned that you've never actually met Death, so you've got no stories with him, have you?'

I shook my head.

'I, on the other hand,' the Doctor said, 'happen to know a *lot* of stories about Death.'

'Bit cramped in here, isn't it?' said the Doctor's companion.

Then the sack was hefted again, and set on the ground, and we climbed out of the sack.

'I must say,' spoke the Doctor before Death could speak, 'I didn't think you could've done that. But what about the neck of the sack? Surely when you set it down, someone from the inside – say, someone who doesn't *want* to travel to the land of the dead – could just jump out!'

Hmph, said Death. I explained to you while you were in the sack, but you seem not to have listened. Nobody can come out of the sack if the neck is closed. Not even I.

'Not even you?' asked the Doctor.

Not even I.

'I don't believe you,' said the Doctor.

I do not care if you believe me, said Death.

'I *bet* you that this sack can't hold you inside.'

A wager, said Death. That would be amusing. What would you wager?

'How about if you win, I will be your servant for a whole week?'

And if I win?

'Well, *you* will be my servant for a whole week.'

That is unacceptable, said Death. Do you understand what would occur if I neglected my duties for a whole week?

'Hmm,' the Doctor said. 'That is a conundrum.' He turned to me. 'What do you say?'

I said, How about a day?

Still too long, Death said. Do you know how many in the land die in a day?

'I do not,' the Doctor said, 'but I'm sure it's enough to fill a sack. Well then. If I win, you grant me a single wish.'

Death thought about it. That is acceptable, he said, finally.

'Right then,' the Doctor said. 'Out with you, Asimah. Let Death have a go.'

The Doctor's companion stepped out of the sack, and the Doctor placed an affectionate hand on her shoulder. 'Are you alright?' he asked.

She made a gesture with her shoulder that satisfied him.

Death stepped into the sack, and pulled the neck of the sack over himself.

Now you close it, he said to the Doctor.

The Doctor smiled in triumph, and holding the neck closed, he tied a rope around it.

What do you think now, Death said from inside. I am securely within the sack.

'So you certainly are,' the Doctor said, and he hefted the sack onto his shoulder.

With Death captured, we returned to the village of the dead, as Death complained from inside the sack, and let out a mighty wail when he understood the Doctor did not mean to let him out.

What is this? the beloved Mother of mankind asked when the Doctor laid the sack at her feet.

'It is Death,' said the Doctor. 'And he's within our power. Now, we could just let him out, but we could also ask him to grant us a wish in exchange.'

And what wish would we ask for? said the oldest Mother.

The Doctor said to Death, 'Death, I'll let you out on one condition. From now on, anyone from the land of the living will be able to visit the land of the dead, and vice versa. No one should be missing their loved ones if they don't have to.

There will be free crossing across the river.'

That is unacceptable, said the muffled voice of Death from inside his own sack. Then I would have no work! What would be the point of delivering someone to the land of the dead if they can just go back?

'Exactly,' said the Doctor. 'Think about it. You wouldn't have any work, and then you could just... do whatever you want. Live a normal life if you like. Or an abnormal one. As you wish.'

Death was quiet for a moment. You make a good point, he said.

'Then you accept?'

But what about the week of servitude you owe me?

'Oh, I wouldn't go back on my word. You will still have it.'

Then, said Death, I accept.

There was a mighty shout of joy from the village of the dead, who realised they would now be able to see everyone they loved in life. The ancient Mother merely smiled and wept.

The Doctor opened the sack of Death, and Death leapt out, a little ashamed, but none the worse for wear.

Tonight, said the happy Mother of mankind, there shall be a great feast in the land of the dead, and all from the land of the living will be invited to come meet their relatives and their friends.

And I, said Death, shall send out the invitations, so the living may know they have nothing to fear from me any longer.

And you, said the kind Mother to me, I must thank you for bringing this Doctor to us.

I bowed to her, and I held out a hand, and as agreed between us, she removed the small blue pendant from her neck and passed it on to me.

The Doctor smiled and grasped my arm. 'And I must thank *you* for helping me get my ship back.'

I merely looked at the ship in my hand.

And why, Doctor, I asked him, would I return this to you? Is it not a ship that travels to all the lands in the world, even those beyond the river in the sky? Why, with this, I could travel to all of these strange places, and to other times, and I could make stories with everyone that has ever lived and ever will?

What have you done, Doctor? asked the old Mother when she realised what the gift was that she had given to me. Do you not know who she is?

And as she spoke, everyone in the village of the dead drew back, for they knew who I was.

'Well,' the Doctor said. 'I didn't know who she was when I first met her, but having spent some time with her now, I know her as Spider, the storyteller and the great trickster. Is that not right?'

Ha, I exclaimed. And how did you know that?

'Well, I saw how everyone here was reluctant to be a part of a story with you, because they had previous experience. Then you died with me, and didn't seem worried about it – that's when I realised you weren't human. And then when we were chasing Death, I saw that you were sometimes a woman running next to me, and sometimes a spider running on legs longer than your body.'

You're a clever one, Doctor, I said.

'Takes one to know one.'

Then I should bid everyone farewell, shouldn't I? For I will now be travelling.

'You could,' said the Doctor. 'But here's the thing. In this land, you are Spider, who is a woman and a spider at her will. Those other lands, though, are not lands of stories. You would have to be one or the other – woman, or worse, spider. Here, every story is your story. Out there, you'd just be a part of someone else's story.'

I looked at the bauble in my hand and back at the Doctor. What choice do I have, Doctor? Nobody wants to make stories with me any longer.

'And why is that? Because you always trick them. And if you take my ship and go, you will remain the same. How about... this time, you don't win? How about you *help*? I'm sure people will be much happier to have a story with someone who helps them. Don't you think?'

I flung up the little bauble into the air, and caught it again in my hand. The Doctor's companion gasped, but the Doctor merely smiled.

And, I said to the Doctor, it would be more fun if they think they have a fighting chance.

I burst into laughter, and threw the Doctor's ship to him. As I laughed, I could feel the village breathe in relief, and in moments, they joined me in my laughter. After his act of bravery, the Doctor looked relieved to have his ship back.

You are a funny one, I said to the Doctor. You are a story coming and a story going. You can travel anywhere you like, but you cannot tell me you don't belong here.

'About that, Spider,' said the Doctor. 'You can't have *two* main characters, can you?'

The Doctor walked to the edge of the crowd, and his companion walked with him. 'How,' she asked him, 'do we get into that?' She pointed at the little ship in the Doctor's hand.

In answer, the Doctor held the ship up to his eye, carefully placed it on top of the horizon, and when he let it go, there it was, in the distance, waiting for them.

'Spider,' he said, turning to us. 'Mother of mankind, Death, and the rest of humanity. I shall take your leave. It has been a pleasure.'

I followed them out of the village of the dead, and joined them in their walk to their ship.

Stay for the feast, Doctor, I said to him. We could exchange many stories.

Opening the door to his ship, he made certain his companion had climbed inside, and then he turned to me. 'Let me just drop her off somewhere safe,' he said. 'And then we shall see if I come back.'

But of course he didn't.

That day, the land rejoiced, and most people in the land were happy, though of course, some had old fights with the dead, and those fights would now continue. But then, no happiness is complete without a little rue to remind us what it means to be happy.

Death is still waiting for the Doctor to return for his week of service. He keeps saying to me that the Doctor lied to him, but I tell him that the Doctor might forget for a long time, but he will keep a promise.

And of course, I remind Death, the Doctor is a clever man. He never said when.

RETROGENESIS, Part 6

by Philip Purser-Hallard

Excerpt from *The Construction of Time*

Tebel knows at once from the sound inside the creche that there's a child missing, even before she counts them. It's not even a conscious process of understanding, just a realisation: *Someone isn't breathing.*

She gasps, then stifles it, anxious not to waken her sleeping charges. Quickly she steps between the rows of beds, peering in at their slumbering inhabitants. The fourth one on the right is empty. *Alylec.* Quick-witted, inexhaustibly curious Alylec, kind to everyone, even the least of insects. He's always been her favourite, though as a wardress she would never admit to such a thing.

For a moment she imagines that she might be dreaming, but no such good fortune smiles on her this night. Then she considers that Alylec might have simply woken during the night and wandered off into the wardery... but the handles on the doors need an adult's strength to operate, designedly so, and she can see no way even his inventive mind could have overcome that on its own.

She stands, shocked into silent paralysis, in the bluish light of the larger moon, until, quite faintly in the distance, she hears the quiet snap of her wardery's outside door being closed.

Tebel runs.

Outside, the playground glints blue beneath the moon, its high walls concealing the town beyond. The shadow of the climbing-frame is a web across the ground. A swing creaks gently in the wind. Beneath a tree in the corner stands a structure that shouldn't be there, a hut of some sort. Beside it stands a curly-haired figure leaning on a walking-stick, a heavy bundle held effortlessly in its left arm.

For a moment she fears that Alylec is already dead. But no, she can hear his breathing.

'I thought I was quiet enough,' the child thief says lightly. The voice is gentle and utterly implacable. A woman's, she thinks at first. But no, the figure, in its layered outfit with a slim scarf knotted at the neck – a man, surely?

Perhaps it is neither. Perhaps it has outgrown such distinctions.

Tebel says, 'Give me that boy.' Her voice trembles with her anger and fear.

'I can't do that.' Regretful now, but without a trace of yielding. No hint of doubt, no room to be persuaded from this course.

'Why not?' she whispers.

'If I do, he'll die. And many events will follow from that, some good and some bad. But overall – on balance – bad.' The walking-stick has disappeared, and the hand now holds a key. Tebel knows somehow that, if Alylec enters that shack, she'll never see him again.

'Don't...' she says, then stops with a sob. 'Please don't take him away. I... I love him so much.'

The kidnapper nods. 'That's why you're a good wardress, Tebel. And that's why

you'll let me take him. Because there's something coming, something far worse than a child-snatcher in the night.'

Reflexively, she glances at the wardery behind her. It stands, as solid as ever in the moonlight. She thought its walls provided safety enough, before tonight.

The sky above is clear, the moon's half-face unoccluded. A bolt of lightning flashes down into the street beyond the walls, and she cries out in shock.

The lightning doesn't dissipate. Its violet glow continues, and a rumble of mechanised grinding sounds drift across the playground. After a moment, she realises that they are voices.

The hut's door is open now, electric light emerging from its inside along with an oddly-modulated hum. Alylec's abductor – *Alylec's rescuer?* – stands on the threshold. 'Alylec will be looked after, I promise. Your world needs him, and others like him. But the other children here have nobody to care for them but you.'

There is another flash, a squeal, the crash of masonry. The sound of crying children.

And Tebel runs. She doesn't look back.

SCENE TO UNCOVER

by Cody Schell

There was no way the card could have really slid under the doors of the ship while it was in flight. Even when not in flight, the doors were completely sealed. Technically the door didn't even exist when the façade wasn't active. And yet the card just slid into existence in motion, and came to stop right by the water cooler. Air bubbles cascaded up as if somehow shaken loose by the light touch of paper.

The card was real. It had substance. It could be grasped, picked up and held. The words were placed haphazardly in different orientations like stacked bricks, but it could be read: EVENT ADMIT ONE. The Doctor flipped the card over, to discover the other side was blank, at which point it became fixed in place.

The thick rectangle of paper was cemented in midair as the Doctor paced around it, flummoxed. An hour passed. Silent observation. Experimentation.

Eventually, tugging at the card revealed that it could be moved, but would return to its original position. For some reason the card was more moveable when not being looked at. Could this be some kind of quantum effect, where observation affected location?

'Ahh. There.' The card was most manipulatable when just at the edge of vision. The Doctor counted down from three and pulled at full strength. The card indeed moved; however, the edge of the Doctor's vision tore away with it. The brightness of the console room flickered, vertigo ensued and reality fell away, very much like a brittle strip of film ripped from its sockets.

* * *

The Doctor's eyes snapped open. The darkness was nearly total, and the humming of the ship was now absent.

'What the devil?' The words didn't echo, leaving a stuffy silence behind them. What was this place?

Feeling around, the Doctor discovered that the wooden chair from the console room was now gone, replaced with an unfamiliar, padded velvet seat with armrests. Reaching out for the console, he discovered another row of such chairs. The Doctor's hands followed the rounded backs of connected seats until they came to an end. The dimmest of light illuminated a slight incline.

'A Theatre?'

The Doctor followed the incline and finally saw a red glow high in the air: EXIT. Stepping onto a soft, carpeted area, the Doctor made towards the word and the promised way out.

Below the EXIT sign, a black door with a small round window set into it. Was it a black door? Or did it just look black in the dim red light? The door opened easily when the long rounded handle was pulled, and revealed more darkness.

The distant trickling of water. Soft steps on the carpet did nothing to reveal

more information about this environment. Touching and knocking revealed information. The walls were smooth, perhaps wallpapered, and there were metal and glass boxes hanging on them. The smell of... something. A smell that couldn't be placed. Coffee? Bread? Something baked in oil.

Further along, a loud clang of metal rang startlingly in the Doctor's ears, echoing only in the short-term memory. A pole, with something attached to it. A soft object, more velvet.

A velvet rope.

A light snapped into existence. 'The Fountain Theatre is closed.' The carrier of light approaches the Doctor. 'Ah, it's you. Welcome.'

'Do I know you? Where am I? I... was in my ship. Is this my ship?'

'You're in the lobby of the Fountain Theatre. This is intermission, remember?'

'Fountain Theatre? I've never been here.'

'You have. Everyone has. Don't worry, I'm...'

'You!' The familiarity of the situation finally snapped into place for the Doctor. 'No... You're not him. But this place is familiar... It's empty, but this is... was this...? The closed toyshop that... exists impossibly late at night? After the doors are locked and there are no living eyes to witness the motionless toys that stare into darkness?'

* * *

'Calm yourself, you are manic! Come, sit.' The man dressed like an usher led the disoriented Doctor to the large, ornate fountain. The Usher sat and indicated for the Doctor to do the same.

'This is the Theatre, as I told you. The Fountain Theatre. It's always been a theatre. You are right, it's late and it's closed. Everywhere is closed right now.' The Usher motioned to the glass doors, through which only darkness could be seen. The beam of his flashlight seemed to stretch out infinitely. 'It's so late.

'Would you like to throw in a coin into the dark water?' He waved his flashlight. Submerged coins gleamed like the eyes of 400 rabbits, terrified in the darkness. 'I could turn on the fountain, if the sound of the water would calm you.'

The Doctor held out a hand. The Usher gasped in surprise. 'A ticket!' He stood excitedly and held his light to the card. 'This is no mere intermission or projector malfunction! It's a change of venue!

'I'm afraid you're late. This is a very old ticket, an invitation to an event long passed. So late. There's only one way to attend, even for you. This is somewhere you could never go in your ship.'

'What do you know of my ship?'

'It could never arrive at this event. Everything was white-hot, and... oh, I shouldn't spoil it for you. Come on. I'll show you to your seat.'

The Usher helped the Doctor to stand. 'We have to hurry.' The Usher ran through a lobby exit, and the Doctor rushed to keep up as they hurried down a seemingly endless hall of theatres.

'I thought you said I was too late.'

'There is... another performance, you might say. The *same* event but a different

production. One designed to be more accessible.

'Let me see your card. Yes, this is it.' The Usher tore the indestructible card neatly in half. 'Here, keep this, it's your stub. Hurry, through these doors.' He whispered theatrically. 'Find a seat, it's time!'

* * *

The Doctor entered another theatre, with old-fashioned seats and no projection screen. There was instead a small stage, the curtain lowered. Having the choice of any seat in the house, the Doctor chose a seat towards the front, but not in the front, towards the centre but not in the centre.

The lights quickly lowered and someone started playing a wandering tune on a piano. The aimless song ended and something grander started. The Doctor heard someone else enter the theatre; it wasn't the Usher, but an indistinct figure of indeterminate gender wearing flowing, loose-fitting garments, who sat down quickly in the darkness.

The curtain rose, revealing a blinding light, transforming total darkness into all-encompassing light that actually cast warmth into the audience. The words CONCERTOS VENUE were lowered from above. Dozens of unidentifiable instruments played the same signature in unison, slowly falling out of synch as the light slowly lessened in intensity. Sometimes these musical phrases would unite, then fall away again. Incredibly simple, but spellbinding.

A backdrop moving on a wire scrolled slowly from white, to grey, to pale rose. The words CONCERTOS VENUE rearranged swiftly to spell EVENT ONE OCCURS.

In an explosion of chaotic percussion, a thousand ping-pong balls were poured onto the stage, some bouncing high, barely losing momentum, some quickly losing their energy and rolling off to the side of the stage, but all weighted perfectly to bounce in perfect syncopation. It was uncanny, and goosebumps rose on the back of the Doctor's hand.

As the bouncing balls disappeared, the beat continued and silhouettes of dancers moved onto the stage from all directions, through trap doors in the floor and lowered from the rafters. Only their dark two-dimensional shapes could be seen, sometimes appearing to face the audience, at other times lunging towards the backdrop, which continued to scroll through the entire spectrum of colours.

Some silhouettes seemed to split from one person, into the illusion of two, into four, and back again. Some moved almost imperceptibly slowly, performing the same dance to a very different effect.

The letters that spelled out EVENT ONE OCCURS moved clumsily, mixing up and somehow eventually reassembling to spell CUE TO CONVENE, with a stray R and S bumping into each other violently and then sheepishly diving out of sight, as if embarrassed. The rest of the letters then gracefully and deliberately lowered out of sight.

The backdrop scrolled as the colour transitioned to a deep, royal purple encrusted with sparking yellow jewels that refracted all light.

The instruments all died away, leaving just two horns repeating the musical phrase. This time the melody trumpeted boldly. Players moved onto the stage

carrying large circles, which they spun and twirled to obscure the scene being set behind them.

Somehow the small stage setting and backdrop gave a very convincing illusion of an immense ballroom, tables stretching into the distance. Guests were arriving as the horn players announced each arrival.

The Doctor clapped excitedly as a spotlight illuminated a throne. From the seat grew a small crimson sphere, as of a rising sun. It grew in size, stretching into an inverted pear. It was a red balloon, tied off with a braid of gold that tethered it to the throne. 'We, High Queen O' the Gen of the Sentients, invite you all to join us in celebration here at the O'ri'gen, the birth of a Prince, the first royal successor to the throne. Our Prince Liam, him divine; Liam, he royal; Liam, his new-light – He, Liam.'

A golden cradle wheeled onto the stage, accompanied by pear-shaped balloons of all different colours, somehow very convincingly appearing to push the new Prince into view. Another star seemed to rise from within the cradle, this time green, and revealing itself to be sausage-shaped rather than pear.

'That's not subtle.' murmured the Doctor.

The Queen proudly floated to be at Prince Liam's side. The Doctor couldn't see any strings, aside from the golden regal chain. Somehow it was apparent that the production was more than mere stagecraft, but rather a translation of real events that happened on a scale and in an environment that were not suited to humanoid life. If a person were to step into this production, they would interact with cosmic events of the distant past.

* * *

'From the Essential East, arriving first, the Singular!'

A man in a silver suit and tie strode across the stage from the left, a spotlight following him as he smiled to the audience, only stopping once he reached the extreme right side.

'I represent myself, the Singular. I am authorised to speak on my behalf and I bring the first gift. The gift of knowledge, that being that which came first, is important, regardless of what that is. There is a first time for everything and the creation of the Universe was just that, the first in an infinite line of firsts.' The man produced a piece of string, pulling it taut to demonstrate the line. He bowed as a balloon caretaker attached this string to the young prince's knot. The spotlight flew across the stage back to Queen Gen.

* * *

'From the Original West, echo the Harmonics!'

The dancers returned in a new colour, this time light blue, moving across the stage in stutters, echoing movements. The dancers, once in the assigned place, sang a single word of their full statement, moving on, allowing the next to continue. The effect was smooth and was delightful to witness.

‘We’ ‘are’ ‘the’ (etc.) ‘Harmonics and want to echo the well wishes towards the Prince. We bring him the gift of working effectively with others. The gift of being an individual within a group that functions as one.’ And with the final word, the final dancer presented a book of sheet music and took her place next to the Singular.

* * *

‘From the Pure North, come the Binaries!’

A woman in a yellow dress danced onto the stage, spun in place and was replaced by a man in a red suit. The two alternated back and forth, the colours flickering orange at times. Only one existed at a time, but the transition between the two was so quick at times that persistence of vision made it so that they appeared to be dancing with each other, handing a card back and forth. Finally the duo presented the card as a gift, one side red, one side yellow. One of Prince Liam’s balloon caretakers wrapped her string around the card and floated it over to the pile. The woman in yellow danced to the right and when she arrived, the man in red stood in place next to the representative of the Harmonics.

* * *

‘Aus dem Reinen Süden, liefert das Uhrwerk!’

Women dressed like clockwork soldiers marched out into the spotlight, the spotlight splitting into new circles to focus on each. An unseen drummer set to work as each woman planted herself in place, as they imitated the working of a clock. The Uhrwerk in front spun her arm as fast as she could and the one behind her mimicked the motion, just slightly slower, and so down the line, each woman was a different unit of time. A bell rang and two more women appeared out of the darkness. They bowed to each other. One handed cheese and crackers to the other, and in exchange received a bottle of wine. The maid mimicked comedic imbibing and drunkenness, bumping into the other timekeepers, throwing them off their rhythm, creating chaos. The others rolled away, leaving just the singular maid. She gazed lovingly at the Prince and presented the bottle of wine, but then thought better of it, instead offering the wheel of cheese.

Uncertain how to react, the Doctor laughed but quickly stifled it, which echoed awkwardly in the resulting silence. The maid stumbled to stand with the others.

* * *

‘Do pro Para Cima , traz os Recursivos!’

Three people in white clinical jackets emerged from stage left, exchanging tiny figures of themselves, also in tiny white clinical jackets. As these figures were juggled, the Doctor could see they were animated as well, also appearing to be

exchanging even smaller figures amongst themselves. Their representative paused from their juggling and gave a gift of a figure, holding a nesting doll. The nesting doll also held a nesting doll.

The spotlight swung back to the right as the next group were introduced.

* * *

'Do pro Para Cima, traz os Recursivos!'

Three people in white clinical jackets emerged from stage left, again. Another spotlight flew to the right, to reveal that the original group was now gone. A tiny spotlight zoomed into focus on the pile of gifts, and the nesting doll was also missing.

Queen Gen cleared her throat. 'Yes, thank you, honoured guests. We respect your ways, but can we please just move on?'

The disappointed Recursives slouched back to their place on the right, dejectedly dropping off the gift again.

* * *

'From the Pure Down, the Modulars!'

Three figures wearing colourful costumes lurched onto the stage, singing: a yellow lion (soprano), a purple deer (tenor) and a blue hippo (bass). They stopped and traded heads mid-verse, and circled each other. Each removed a colourful paw/hoof and traded in the opposite direction. This carried on for the rest of the song, until all the pieces were back with their original sets, except for the feet. The antlered deer approached the Prince, taking the string given by the Singular and replacing it with a piece of yarn from its horns.

The deer, now a soprano, sang 'You're You. Thank Welcome!' The string was then affixed to the antler.

* * *

The Queen stood, addressing her guests and thanking them for their gifts.

'Strong tides pull in other friends from the other twelve minor directions. The Null, the Mirrored, the Never, the Always, the Large and Distant, the Winged, the...' (gasp, six seconds of held breath, phew), 'the Now Cooled, the De-refracted, the Sorted, the Irrational, the Nearly Last.

'And finally, hosting from the Origin, the Sentients.'

The Queen floated towards the front of the stage, the front of her crown the only indication of where she was directing her attention. 'What outsiders have arrived to witness and validate our ceremony?'

A spotlight appeared above the Doctor. Queen Gen raised a string to the surface of her balloon as if trying to shade the light from her face. 'You, sir?'

The Doctor didn't react, but after a moment looked towards the back of the theatre as if looking for someone else.

'No, you, sir.'

'*Me?* Oh. *Oh!* Sorry, you confused me for a moment, I'm... uh... yes, well I am not sure why I'm here but I was invited quite mysteriously, and I'm not sure by who.'

'That would be the Uhrwerk, Doctor. This was their task as an impartial party, as we've agreed to help each other at these times of transfer of power.'

The Doctor's eyes scanned the stage but the Uhrwerk representative was nowhere to be seen. 'I'm afraid I am not familiar with them, but I suppose this is an honour. But why me?'

'You and the other.' The royal string gestured towards the back of the theatre.

'*The Other?*' The Doctor spun around. There was another figure in the audience, tall, with dark hair and blue eyes. The person who entered the theatre just as the production began.

The Doctor sighed for a moment as if relieved, but then stiffened. 'It's you... Hazel.'

'Hello, Doctor.'

The two stood, just looking at each other. The roles had reversed, the entire production behind them, including some peeking out from behind the curtains, now the audience.

'There must be a reason that the Uhrwerk used their Mechknowledgy to reach into the chilly depths of distant future possibilities to draw the two of you here.'

'And they've allowed us this method of seeing you, and interacting with you?'

'Correct. And you appear in an amusing, artificial fashion to us as well, here in our own time, which is off limits for fragile, frozen creatures such as yourself.'

Hazel and the Doctor continued to stare – Hazel's eyes underscored by a veil, and the Doctor's by a beard.

'You must know why you're here. You must have some vision, an experience, a wisdom that the two of you share.'

Hazel and the Doctor intertwined their fingers. 'There can only be one story, don't you think, Doctor?'

'Oh yes.'

Released from Hazel's fingers, the Doctor turned to address the production.

'There was a madman. Under his influence, the people of our world split. One group stayed home, the others left for another world in the system. Each group adopted their own fashions and manners. Each group was less without the other and the individuals had less freedom. Obsessed, as they were, with comparing themselves to the other.'

Queen Gen bobbed/nodded her understanding.

'Two of us had no particular allegiance to the groups that we found ourselves in. We devised a chance to switch places. A plan, forgotten even by ourselves, disguised us as members of the opposite group. After a period of time, we remembered our true natures, as planned. The scheme worked and together we were able to leverage our positions to trigger events – to broker peace, if not true understanding.'

Hazel put an arm around the Doctor's shoulders and leaned down to rest a cheek upon the Doctor's hair. 'We are bound together in a strange way. Physically

– we should have been as the other.'

In a rapid succession of red and yellow, the Binaries attempted to give each other a shocked look, but as usual couldn't even see each other.

'And yet, we don't know the difference. We are who we are, regardless of outward appearances.'

'The deception may have done more harm than good. We broke down some walls that had been built up, but the situation also created suspicion.'

'Until we found another compromise.'

'The trick can't be repeated. We both carry a tattoo here, on our forearms.'

At the edge of the crowd, the Modulars removed their arms and looked closely at them before trading again.

'It indicates when appearances are drastically and artificially shaped, unwillingly or otherwise. To protect the individual against being unknowingly mind-shaped, as well as protecting any political group from infiltration.'

The Modular Lion took out a marker and wrote 'LION' on her hippo arm. The Deer slapped her hand with the other Hippo hand. The Hippo raised a deer hoof to its lips and shushed them both.

Queen Gen hovered between the Doctor and Hazel. 'Hmm. We will take this story into consideration, although we aren't sure it has an immediate application. Before we adjourn, you may now present your gift to Prince Liam.'

Both appeared shocked, but quickly started checking about their persons. 'Gift, ah... yes, a gift, I'm sure we have something...' stammered the Doctor.

A Recursive appeared between them and seemed to rip something off each of their faces. But when both reached up to check their faces, all was as it should be.

'Here are the gifts!' The Recursive winked at their still shocked appearances. 'A veil and a beard.' Somehow the strange creature had been able to duplicate them both.

The Queen hovered, tilting slightly askew as she surveyed the gifts. 'We are not sure this is appropriate. After all, the Prince doesn't even have a face, not to mention...'

One of the Harmonics set the gifts with the others. 'Don't let's insult their generosity, Madam. Let the Prince decide if either suit him someday.' The Queen bobbed, as if about to object.

'Sommmmmeeeeddaaaaaaayyyyyy!' sang the Harmonic, stretching out the word in song until the Queen had obviously given up her protestations.

'Very well.' The entire cast started to withdraw as the lights started to dim. 'Hazel. Doctor. Thank you for joining our ceremony, and take word of us to your own time.'

The two clasped hands as the only remaining spotlight shone through Queen High D'roux de Gen one last time, her red spherical body glowing as if from within. The light faded so slowly it was hard to tell if any perception of light was a lingering on the retinas or not.

Once the darkness was certain, the Doctor turned to talk to Hazel only to be greeted by a painful white light flare filling up the room.

The console room.

* * *

Alone, the Doctor sat up, narrowly avoiding the edge of the console and a head injury. ‘Ouch. Make that *another* head injury.’ The Doctor found some striped bandages in a cabinet and wrapped the sore spot carefully.

On the floor, the ticket was no longer stuck in space and was torn. But only one half could be found. The Doctor absent-mindedly used the edge of the card as a beard scratcher and wondered where the other half could be.

THE HIVE MINDERS, Part 2

by Ian McIntire

Consciousness

The creature looked to be some horrific combination of dragonfly and praying mantis, scaled up to three meters long. Although most insectoids this large tended to use the 'insectaur' body structure – using their hindmost four legs for locomotion and the frontmost pair for manipulatory appendages – this species had repurposed their extended abdomen for slithering along the ground, leaving all six legs free to be used as grasping appendages... to some extent or another. This creature's front set were a pair of formidable and lethal-looking claws. Given the length of its arms, the speed at which he'd seen it move earlier, and its probable strength, the Doctor estimated that it would take less than a second for it to cross the distance between them and tear him in half.

The liquid inside the pair of cylinders it was carrying in its other two sets of limbs sloshed slightly as it set them on the bar in front of it. Freed of its burden, the creature rubbed two of its smaller limbs together, emitting a semblance of intelligible speech: 'Your drinks, sir. Will there be anything else? If you provide your cabin number, I can run a tab.'

The Doctor withdrew some currency from a pocket and politely placed it on the bar. Giving it a second thought, he also fished his pipe from his coat, and asked the creature, 'Don't suppose I could trouble you for a light?'

The creature took a moment to freeze, perhaps unsure of exactly what it was being asked. 'I'm afraid, sir, that there's no smoking aboard the *Illostra.'* The creature's compound eyes didn't give the same visual cues that a humanoid's would have, but the Doctor nonetheless sensed that the bug's attention was drawn over his shoulder to the table at the corner of the lounge where his companion waited. He picked up the drinks and began walking away, affecting not to hear the creature's next comment: 'My apologies, sir. Any refreshments you or your partner order this evening are on the house.'

The man at the table was concentrating on the object in front of him. It was a roughly spherical polyhedron about nine inches across, whose faces consisted of a seemingly random assortment of irregular glossy black triangles. As the Doctor approached, the man touched the object, and the constituent triangles were instantly in a completely different configuration, despite the object overall not appreciably changing. The man did this twice more before the Doctor could set the drinks down on the table to either side of the polyhedron.

'That's not likely to have any effect. I'd venture that it won't open until we reach our destination,' the Doctor said, picking up his mug and scrutinising the amber liquid inside.

'I know,' said Krif. 'Just killing time, I suppose.' He raised his glass. 'What shall we drink to?'

The Doctor refrained from scowling or rolling his eyes. 'To the successful

completion of this mission,' he settled on. Now it was Krif's turn to look askance, but he nonetheless nodded, clinked the Doctor's mug, and took a sip of his own cocktail.

'How long has it been?' Krif asked.

'About fifteen centuries, I should think. Long enough for the Banques system to have Swärrn bartenders.'

Krif chuckled. 'I meant, "How long has it been for you?" It must be thirty years since I last saw you – how long since you've seen me? Or Rue?'

'Ah. Well, in that case, a handful of lifetimes.' The service door behind the bar swung open, and two additional Swärrn emerged. One began examining the selection of spirits along the back of the bar, while the other grabbed a towel and began wiping off the already fairly clean bar and tables. 'So, bring me up to speed on what you've been doing since then,' the Doctor requested, eager to steer the conversation away from his own activities.

Krif began telling the Doctor about his life teaching, his recent retirement, and a variety of other minutiae. The Doctor half-listened, but the bulk of his attention was being pulled toward the two recently-arrived servitors. They were very gradually converging on the Doctor and Krif's table. The Swärrn were taking their time about it, but it was undeniably a pincer movement with Krif at its centre. While he tried his best to avoid carrying overt weapons, the Doctor was suddenly very glad of having his walking stick and pipe handy. His mind had already worked through at least six different scenarios for counterattack and escape when a human steward entered through the main entrance, followed by a distinguished-looking woman.

The steward's appearance seemed to have scared off the Swärrn – they each turned and slithered back into the kitchen area. The steward, for his part, didn't seem to have noticed anything awry with the barstaff, but nonetheless made a beeline for the Doctor and Krif's table, while the woman who'd entered with him waited by the door.

'Excuse me, gentlemen,' the porter said. 'Are you the passengers in Hill suite?'

'We are,' the Doctor confirmed warily.

'Would you be so good as to come with me to the luggage bay? I believe there may be an issue that we need to resolve. Your luggage seems to be blocking Madame dru mal Grange's access to her husband's body.'

* * *

The issue was easy enough to resolve once the Doctor released the parking brake on the TARDIS. Spirotos dru mal Grange had died about a week earlier, and his widow had decided to incorporate his burial in space into a cruise to Primalith. The TARDIS had (puckishly?) decided to materialise directly in front of the coffin, almost making tomorrow's guest of honour late for his own funeral. The Doctor had been wondering what the private event on tomorrow's cruise itinerary was, and now he found himself and Krif invited to it. 'By way of apologising for interrupting your evening with your...,' Madame dru mal Grange had said, trying to puzzle out precisely what the two men's relationship was, '...mentor.' The Doctor had been about to make their apologies, but Krif, suppressing a chuckle,

had accepted for both himself and his ‘protégé’. ‘I’m sure it’ll be a good learning experience for you, Doctor.’

Back in the Hill suite, the Doctor checked the medicine cabinet for healing accelerant – no luck. The most recent wounds circling his cloudband (picked up from... where was it again? Ah yes, Borfen) would have to heal at the usual pace, which these days seemed far too slow. Providence only knew when he’d be able to return home for an evaluation, but he again considered asking the higher-ups for a more discreet leash, something that wouldn’t prompt local authorities to undertake futile attempts at removing it. None of those authorities had become frustrated enough to try amputating his hand... but it was probably only a matter of time.

Staring at his own reflection in the lavatory’s mirror, he rubbed his neck and clavicle thoughtfully. The sensation of indestructible cloudband tendrils coiling up from his wrist, through his arm and collarbone and ultimately anchoring their tips in his upper vertebrae was almost certainly psychosomatic... but that didn’t mean that the tendrils weren’t there. Morbidly, the Doctor imagined an especially stubborn secret police force who might view the removal of the cloudband as a personal challenge, and leave him with nothing but a series of bloody chunks dangling from his shoulder like a string of particularly grisly beads.

The Hill suite, to which he and Krif had been assigned, wasn’t quite the largest available on the ship, but it was certainly in the upper echelon. Two private sleeping areas, but a single lavatory between them. The Doctor could hear Krif snoring gently through the door. He’d had had some misgivings about involving Krif in one of these missions, but it’s not as though No. 7 had given him any choice in the matter. Maybe the lavish accommodations were No. 7’s attempt to make up for it.

It *was* good to see the fellow. It sounded as though he’d landed on his feet after they’d parted company on Hastrobal Scarrus, even if the lad had jumped at the chance to step into the TARDIS once again... once he recognised the machine. ‘It’s, erm, bluer and boxier than I recall it being.’

The Doctor had showed no outward evidence of being embarrassed, but nonetheless replied ‘Overdue maintenance visit, I tend to think. I’m told that without it, they start to gravitate towards idiosyncratic forms.’

He probed at his discomfort a bit more. Was Krif in any danger from this mission? On the one hand, he was quite a bit older than the Doctor remembered, but he’d always been serviceable in a fight, and didn’t seem that infirm. And by the same token, while appearances could be deceiving, this mission didn’t seem to be all that challenging. He was still a little bit fuzzy on what he was meant to be doing here, but cooling one’s heels in a first-class cabin on a cruise to Primalith was something that he could handle with ease.

So, why the worry?

<<<REST>>> said the cloudband.

One of the points of a cloudband was to anonymise the interaction between wearer and handler. Nonetheless, the Doctor fancied that he’d developed a sense of what sort of a person was on the other end of the device at his wrist. This one was his seventh, and seemed to be something of a bleeding heart. He appreciated the concern for his wellbeing, but if No. 7 had any knowledge of the Doctor’s history, they would have known that rest was a commodity more scarce than

good intentions in his world. It wasn't entirely accurate to say that the Doctor hadn't slept in years – whenever he pressed his body to the limit, he would invariably experience a few hours of blissful unconsciousness afterwards, to heal and recover. But a nap for no reason? The nightly visit to dreamland that humans indulged in – that the snoring Krif was indulging in at this very moment? Not for him.

Nonetheless, he had nothing better to do. Returning to his bunk, he kicked off his boots and reclined. And for a few hours, until Krif awoke and suggested they get breakfast before the funeral, he counted tallymarks.

* * *

About a fifth of the passengers were on board specifically for Spirotos' funeral, and the Doctor didn't find it too different from terrestrial examples.

Spirotos' widow and a few others memorialised him while standing behind a simple podium. The picture they painted was fairly anodyne, and the Doctor didn't find himself particularly regretful that he hadn't had a chance to meet the deceased in person. As these speeches sputtered to a close, the Doctor leaned towards Krif and whispered 'So, how does this compare with Banquesian funerals from your era?'

'It's not too different, I guess. Vacuum burials were pretty common where I grew up.' The service was taking place in what appeared to be a converted cargo bay, with Spirotos' coffin on the other side of a transparent airlock, and the podium set up in front of it. 'It's certainly nice to see a good mixture of Primalithian and Spacer attendees – it looks like transit up and down the gravity well is a lot easier now.' Sure enough, there was a broad spectrum of Banquesian physiologies on display: a few were definitely from space habitats, and a few definitely from Primalith, downwell, but there were also quite a number from somewhere between the two. One non-human – an aquatic J'Gren, grafted to a crablike vralk to allow them ease of movement in an air-based environment – was also in attendance.

'Not sure what that coffin's made of, though,' Krif concluded. The coffin itself was an elongated ovoid, its outer layer some fibrous, paper-like substance. It didn't really look tough enough to withstand being ejected out an airlock.

The chaplain announced that a buffet was now available for the attendees, and the structured segment of the proceedings appeared to be coming to an end. At varying speeds, the bulk of the attendees stood up and began to drift towards the aromas of food wafting from the back of the bay. A younger man who'd been introduced earlier as Spirotos' son Belketh stayed behind by the airlock and was brought his own plate of food by one of the Swärrn servitors as the rest of the attendees queued up for lunch. Next to Belketh rested a dinner-plate-sized gong.

After a few minutes of mingling with the other guests, the Doctor and Krif reconnected. 'So, Mr Mentor, have you noticed anything odd about the guests?'

Krif shrugged. 'Well, I've been told by a number of people that I am the spitting image of a film actor by the name of "Derk van mer Mamnitz". I guess I'll have to look him up once we get back to our suite to know if I'm being insulted or not...

but apart from that, nothing worrying. Although I feel like there's something I'm missing about this whole process. No thank you.' This last comment was directed towards one of the Swärrn, who'd approached with a tray of appetisers. 'I get the sense that Spirotos' son is, I don't know, standing watch over the coffin? He hasn't moved from his spot by the airlock, and never looks away from it for very long.'

The Doctor shook his head. 'Worth investigating further, certainly. But look at the rest of the guests.' He directed Krif's attention to the various cliques and groups standing in the bay. 'The guests fall into two different categories: one larger group that mingles pretty freely, and them.' He pointed to a particular group Krif realised had been much more insular than the rest of the guests, bunching up together and rarely straying too far from each other. 'It's not a stringent division – there's been some churn, but those folk definitely have the wagons circled. What do they all have in common?'

After turning down an additional offer of hors d'oeuvres, Krif looked again. 'Hmmm... Well, they look to be a roughly equal mix of Spacer and Grounder body types, so that's not it. Um, collars? A lot of them are wearing high collars.'

'Right. Now, look at the necks of the other guests.'

Looking more closely at the backs of the other guests' necks, Krif noticed some odd discoloration and distension, just at the base of the skull. He looked back at the insular clique again. One of the men was lacking a prominent collar, and he didn't have the head-lump.

'Excuse me!' came a cheerful voice from off to the side. It was the J'Gren, who had earlier introduced itself as Vimnot. 'Just hoping to grab a chicken wing.' Vimnot manoeuvred between Krif and a nearby Swärrn waiter, and extended a delicate chitinous claw toward its tray. 'Perhaps I should stick close to you – all the waiters seem to be doing it!' it said, waving the newly-procured nibble at the Doctor and Krif.

Krif looked around again. Vimnot was right – the Swärrn waiters were circling him. The human steward by the buffet table had apparently noticed too, and stepped over to shoo the Swärrn into other parts of the event, pausing only to give Vimnot the chance to load his plate with crudité, toast points, and stuffed mushroom caps. 'Have you tried these? They're quite delicious,' the J'Gren asked.

'Indeed. Scrumptious' the Doctor agreed. 'Mr Vimnot, perhaps you could answer a few questions for us. We're not from around here, and we were wondering if you knew anything about the, ah – implants, I suppose? – at the base of most of the humans' necks around here.'

Vimnot had been caught with a mouthful of mushroom, and took a moment to chew and swallow. 'Oh, you must really be from outside the system. Those are bridges.'

'Bridges?'

'Larvae.'

Before Vimnot could elaborate, the sound of a gong came from the direction of the airlock. 'Gentles, if I could have your attention! It's time to say goodbye to my father!' Belketh bellowed.

As the attendees quickly drifted toward the airlock, the Doctor turned to Krif and said 'I think I've just worked something out.'

Inside the airlock, Spirotos' coffin had developed a hole... and over the course of the next few minutes, the attendees watched as a nymph Swärrn emerged from

it. The coffin – or cocoon, as the Doctor and Krif now recognised it to be – was left in shreds on the floor of the airlock, and after a few further minutes resting and gathering its strength, the Swärrn activated the outer door control and flew out into interplanetary space.

'Goodbye, my love,' Madame dru mal Grange said. 'May we meet again.'

'May we meet again,' echoed the other attendees. At which point, most of them reached up to touch the backs of their respective necks – those of them that weren't wearing collars, at least.

* * *

Vimnot later explained further over drinks in the cocktail lounge, still impressed by the level of service that the Swärrn were providing to their party of three.

'As I understand it, the key was realising that they possessed a rudimentary group consciousness. Back in the early days of the system, they used to just pick one individual to train up and feed to the bugs.' Krif grinned slightly – Vimnot had no way of realising how familiar Krif was with this part of the story. 'But it was a single point of failure. I understand there were some coups or something when their screening failed.'

'So, they democratised it,' the Doctor concluded. 'Instead of just a single, exemplary individual to contribute their memories to the Swärrn, they've got the bulk of the civilisation doing it.'

Vimnot gesticulated with its claws, its method of nodding. 'Upon reaching majority, each human in the Banques system has the opportunity to receive an implanted larva, which takes up residence on the back of their neck. They don't all choose to receive it, obviously, but for those that do, throughout their life, the larva extends tendrils throughout the host's brain.' At the mention of tendrils, the Doctor took a moment to rub his shoulder thoughtfully. 'They learn the firing pattern of the humans' brain tissue, and mirror it, but otherwise remain dormant. Once the human reaches the end of their life – typically decades later, hopefully of natural causes – the larva (with an in-depth record of the human's memories and experiences, and assuming it's still intact) awakens, and begins the process of using the human's body to pupate. And thence, as we saw, the adult form hatches, and takes its place among the rest of the system's servitor population. They often call them *bridges*, because they're a bridge to a new phase of life.'

'Which means the resulting Swärrn has access, on some level, to the sum total of human knowledge that's developed in the system over the last thousand years or so. Enough of them decide to be of service to their descendants that they work as bartenders, waiters... probably every type of job that the humans don't want to do.' The Doctor took a swig of ale. Krif couldn't tell from his friend's tone whether he was impressed, sickened, or some other state entirely.

'So, how does this reservoir of knowledge work, then?' Krif asked. 'Is Spirotos – or the Swärrn he turned into – going to show up behind the bar tomorrow, complaining about the floral arrangements at his service?'

Vimnot's claws gesticulated in a different way. 'I'm an historian, not a biologist, but I don't think it works like that. What happens to a bubble when it ascends to the ocean's surface? The knowledge is there, but not in any individuated form.' Vimnot took a nibble from the cheese plate in front of it. 'Having said that, as an

historian, I can say with confidence that the historical data that results from the system is quite good. I understand that they made extensive use of groupmind information for that movie about the coup from a few decades back. The one with... what's his name?'

Krif felt his stomach drop. 'Derk van mer Mamnitz?'

'Yes, that's the one! You'll have to excuse me, humans tend to blur together a bit for me.'

'Are there really memories in the Swärrn collective that stretch back that far?'

'Oh yes! Not very many – that was from before the practice of bridging, obviously. But the memories from that era tend to be – ah, I supposed "curated" might be the best term – a bit more than more mundane recollections like those from our friend Spirotos.'

The Doctor shook his head. 'Humans will never cease to amaze me. They built themselves an afterlife out of Swärrn brains.'

'Oh, I think *Swärrn* is a rather archaic form of the species name.' Vimnot proceeded to tell them what the modern Banquesian term was.

The Doctor's eyes widened slightly. 'Probably wind up getting blamed for these chaps, too.'

* * *

After returning to their suite – and navigating their way past the mountain of complimentary fruit baskets, newspapers, and other sundries that had been left in front of their door – Krif asked the Doctor what he thought of the practice of 'bridging'.

'I'm not sure,' the Doctor confessed. 'It's a great deal to wrap one's head around.' He scratched at his neck. 'I think I'd be much more worried if it were somehow compulsory. There's still something that doesn't sit right about it, though. What about you? This is your home, after all. You strived and competed for the right to pass your memories along to these beings, and now that capacity is available to all and sundry. How do you feel about that?'

'Well, you know me,' Krif said between mouthfuls of an apple from one of the fruit baskets. 'I'm fairly utilitarian. I suppose we're looking at this society from a somewhat privileged position, so there are probably issues that I just can't see at the moment. But –' and here, he shrugged. 'From what I've heard, so far so good, I guess. I don't see any evidence of the enmity between Grounders and Spacers that almost caused... Oh, hey!'

'What?'

The Hill suite was equipped with a film library, and Krif crossed to it eagerly, searching through the list of titles. 'I wanted to check out that movie that Vimnot mentioned. Maybe it's just my ego talking, but I'd quite like to see how we're remembered. *If* we're remembered. Aha!' He brandished a film canister aloft triumphantly, and turned back to the Doctor. 'Popcorn?'

A few hours later, Krif issued his verdict. 'Well, that was... imaginative.'

'I thought the ending was a bit abrupt.' The Doctor opined.

'They had no way of knowing I'd survived, so I suppose they did pretty well

with the information available. But...'

'But...?'

'They seemed to be of the belief that all of the training and study I did was strictly technical. I might have been studying accounting, for all it mattered. It's good to be remembered, but all of the ethical and philosophical training I did was just as – if not more – important, and they didn't think to even mention it.'

The Doctor stood up and stretched. 'Whatever the case, I think it's time for bed. Don't forget, the cruise ends tomorrow, and we go down to Primalith. I have no idea what we'll find down there, but whatever it is, we'll probably need our rest for it.'

As usual, the Doctor didn't actually sleep. But if he had, he would have dreamed about collars.

* * *

The orbital lift was a massive engineering project that had taken centuries to complete. To the Doctor's eyes, it looked as though the Eiffel Tower had been stretched up from the surface so as to reach the gates of outer space. A massive lift car nestled just under its crown, large enough to hold all of the *Illostra's* passengers and their cargo (but without all those bulky luxury facilities that the cruise ship boasted).

But to the Banquesians, it wasn't anything more impressive than a ferry between an island and the mainland.

Having left the *Illostra* behind, Krif took his seat next to the Doctor, the black message pod clutched in his arms. The TARDIS had safely been loaded aboard the lift car's cargo hold, and would be retrievable from baggage claim once they reached the surface. Insectoids roamed the aisles, seeing to all of the passengers' needs. At the appointed moment, the car began its slow descent to the surface of Primalith.

Lost in thought, the Doctor peered out a window. Off in the distance, more vessels were approaching the crown of the orbital lift tower – it was a busy port, and must require a great deal of coordination to make sure everything ran smoothly.

'Penny for them?' Krif asked.

'Mm? Oh, just thinking about that "un-bridged" group from the funeral yesterday.' With a flick of his chin, he pointed out one of them sitting a few rows over, a young woman named Comsoth who was one of Spirotos' distant relatives.

A brief flash of light from the window drew their attention. Moments later, a few of the passengers sitting in window seats along the Doctor's side of the craft let out startled gasps and other sounds of surprise.

Close to the crown, two ships had collided. They looked largely intact, but even at this distance, Krif could see a cloud of debris expanding outward from the impact site.

And even at this distance, it was only seconds before a sudden, high-pitched whine could be heard throughout the lift car, followed immediately by a persistent whistling sound. A decompression alarm began to sound, and the

Doctor and Krif looked around for the location of the hull puncture. Panic was mounting among the passengers as the insectoids sprang into action.

One of the servitors located the puncture quickly, and used a sealant gun from a nearby emergency kit to plug the hole. Any other vessel might have been able to perform some evasive manoeuvres, but the lift car was on a track. It couldn't even increase speed, since that would have also sped up its counterweight car rising up from the planet, and subjected it to an unsafe amount of atmospheric friction.

Satisfied that the puncture was fixed, the insectoids began evacuating the breached passenger compartment into other compartments that reported no damage. To their credit, the insectoids were quite good at keeping things moving quickly but smoothly.

'Something's wrong,' the Doctor mused.

'No kidding!' Krif exclaimed.

'I'm not talking about the hull breach. Look at the evacuation process. Pay attention to who's being taken first.'

Krif saw it: the servitors were consistently moving passengers with larval bridges to the safer areas of the ship, but leaving the unbridged – like the Doctor, Krif, Vimnot, and Comsoth – where they were.

The Doctor was out of his seat like a shot, and stalked up to the closest servitor. 'Excuse me – we'd like to be evacuated, too.'

It replied in its musical hand-saw voice: 'Sir, please return to your seat. The danger is over, and we'll be serving drinks shortly.'

'You've just taken some of the passengers to safer compartments – ones on the interior, less likely to be hit by any further debris. You should take the rest of us, too.'

'Those compartments can't comfortably handle extra passengers.'

'Comfort? We're talking about safety, and you're concerned that the dru mal Grange family might have to bump elbows with the non-bridged hoi polloi for an hour or two?'

'Return to your seat, sir.' It had positioned itself directly in the doorway leading to the interior compartment and was not budging. Krif, attuned to Swärrn behaviour from his Curriculum training, heard the implied threat in the statement, even if no one else could.

The Doctor turned his back to the servitor, withdrew his pipe from a pocket and whispered to Krif, 'I think I know how to handle this. In order to survive long enough to pupate, the larva has to remain intact, which means the human host needs to avoid situations that would destroy the larva. Hence, every bridged human needs to avoid, and have a healthy respect of –' He lit the pipe, stuck it in his mouth, and turned to face the servitor. 'Fire.' He puffed a cloud of smoke, blowing it in the general direction of the servitor.

The servitor cocked its head, then moved too quickly for either of them to easily see. The Doctor was left with the stump of his pipe stem sticking from his teeth and a hole in the fingertip of his glove about a centimetre across. The glove tip drifted to the ground, and the servitor crushed the hardwood pipe bowl in one of its claws.

'No smoking, sir. Please return to your seat.'

The Doctor, now fuming only figuratively, took a deep breath, but before he

could say or do anything, Krif asked the servitor 'Do you know who I am?'

The servitor lacked eyelids, but Krif was sure that it would have blinked in surprise if it could have. 'You are Krif Leliflor, Curriculum Template for the middle calendar date 14/36/1947. You were believed to have died during the attempted faction coup of 1949. We cannot explain your presence here and now, but your identity is confirmed, sir.'

'Do you accept my authority?'

'Yes.'

'Then move these people to a safer compartment.' And as one, all of the servitors resumed their evacuation of the remaining passengers.

The look on the Doctor's face was priceless. 'Impressive,' he allowed.

'It was a long shot,' Krif demurred. 'I thought it was just as likely that it would have said, "Yes, Mr van mer Mamnitz. May we have your autograph?"'

* * *

The lift car made it to the surface without further incident. It had taken a little more processing time than usual, but the two of them were now in baggage claim, awaiting the unloading of the TARDIS. The local news services were abuzz with information about the cargo ship collision in orbit above – luckily, no one had been injured. Krif paid little attention, though – for the first time in his life, he was standing on the surface of Primalith.

<<<INSTRUCTIONS>>> the Doctor sent through his cloudband.

<<<TALK>>> came the reply.

'So, is it everything you expected it to be?'

Krif took a deep breath. 'Smells a little different. But after seeing so much of the universe with you all those years ago, I guess I shouldn't be surprised by that.' Krif hefted the Time Lord message pod. 'So, what now?'

'I was just asking that, myself. My superiors were suggesting that we talk to someone.'

'Or to each other?'

'Maybe.'

Krif took another deep breath. 'There's another conflict coming, isn't there?'

The Doctor nodded sombrely. 'In your time, the prejudice was between Spacers and Grounders. Now, it's a little less obvious... but there are signs of nascent segregation against the unbridged that will only increase with time. The bridged may not be outright taught that the unbridged are less worthy of rights and privileges. But in thousands of subtle ways, the belief that the unbridged have "disposable souls" is propagating, and I don't see any way that that doesn't get distilled and strengthened over time. And it's only a short jump from "disposable souls" to "disposable people".'

'There's no way to avoid it?'

The Doctor shook his head sadly. 'With bigotry, there's a common human belief that once the old generation dies out, their prejudices will die with them. That's wrong, for a couple of different reasons... but whatever truth there is to it wouldn't apply here. The old prejudices aren't dying off, they're just being

uploaded into the great bug-brained afterlife in the sky. And that, in turn, is reinforcing entirely new prejudices in the next generation. It's a feedback loop.'

'We interrupted that loop on the orbital lift car.'

'You can hardly pull the "Do you know who I am?" trick across the entire system for the next several centuries.'

'Can't I?'

The Doctor turned to his friend. 'What are you suggesting?'

'I... think I want to stay here. In Banques. Maybe even on Primalith.'

'I see.'

'Clearly, I have some cachet with the servitor population. I would guess that same credibility might extend to the humans, too, given enough time and testimony from the servitors. I've been ready to move on from Hastrobal Scarrus for quite some time... but here, I could become a force for change, for tolerance. You know, all the things I picked up from you and Rue back in the day. I could start a school, teach the bridged how important acceptance of the unbridged is. Maybe convince a few folks who'd otherwise remain unbridged of the importance of having their experiences in dealing with this kind of prejudice uploaded alongside the privileged folks.'

'And get one of the larvae implanted yourself?'

Krif grinned. 'Hey, I've still got a few good decades ahead of me – that's a decision I can make closer to my twilight years. Ah, there she is!' The TARDIS was being unloaded from a nearby stevedroid.

'Sounds like a big project.'

'Something else I learned from you: never be afraid of the challenging stuff. Having said that, I guess the main question I have is where to get the resources to do all this.'

The two of them suddenly heard a quiet, subsonic hum from under Krif's arm. The message pod was fading in front of their eyes, leaving a slim envelope behind with Krif's name scrawled on it. He laughed. 'I guess that answers a couple of different questions!'

<<<SUCCESS>>> sent the cloudband. <<<DEPART>>>

'So, I suppose this is goodbye, then. It was good to see you again, Krif. I'm proud of you.'

'I'm proud of you too, protégé. Do me two favours?'

'Name them.'

'Swing by here again in a few hundred years. See how things turn out.'

'Done.'

'And... take care of yourself.' The Doctor's face fell. Krif gestured at the Doctor's wrist. 'I don't know exactly what this is all about, and I didn't want to pry. But you don't seem happy, and you deserve to be.' The Doctor allowed himself to be hugged. And a few moments later, found himself hugging Krif back.

'Thank you, Krif. I'm... not sure what to do.'

'Somebody wise once told me, "What the caterpillar calls the end, the rest of the world calls a butterfly." A little on the pompous side, maybe, but it's stuck with me.' A stevedroid deposited the TARDIS in front of the Doctor. A few minutes later, it was gone, and Krif was opening his envelope.

* * *

<<<SUCCESS – SUCCESS – SUCCESS>>>. No. 7 was becoming insistent, and the Doctor was trying hard to see it their way. The Banques system was hopefully on a path to a brighter future, and no one had had to die for that outcome. Moreover, this new path was the direct result of the lessons that the Doctor had imparted to Krif all those years ago. In the grand scheme of things, it was as heartening a mission as the Doctor was ever likely to be sent on, and he was working hard to internalise that. It was almost certainly what No. 7 was hoping for, and the Doctor appreciated the concern, both from his old friend, and from his current handler.

But gravity wells are strong things, and in his mind, he was wondering what sort of lessons Krif might have picked up from him had they travelled together in more recent days. What would he have learned from watching the Doctor's actions on Borfen, in the Ariatric Wastes, or with Marduk?

<<<SUCC–>>>

The sudden cut-off was unexpected, but the Doctor quickly realised that it was probably only a matter of time. He mentally raised a glass to the departed No. 7. Bleeding hearts never lasted long in this business.

<<<PREPARE>>> No. 8 sent. The Doctor turned toward the materials provided for his next mission, leaving Primalith and its inhabitants behind him.

RETROGENESIS, Part 7

by Philip Purser-Hallard

Excerpt from *Zero Hour*

The Doctor appreciated irony. He often had to, in his position. The shrine to the Peaceful Way in the corner of the War Room, though... that was laying it on a bit thick.

'Alylec would not approve,' he murmured, riffling through the papers on the desk. However good your electronic filing systems, for security nothing beat good old-fashioned wood-pulp.

The crystal cloudband on his wrist gave its usual irksome buzz. <<<IRRELEVANT>>> it told him.

The Doctor sighed. 'I didn't say I wouldn't do it.'

<<<IRRELEVANT>>> it repeated.

'Well, you're as much fun as ever.' If this temporary embarrassment went on much longer, he'd develop a habit of conversing with inanimate objects.

The shrine stood between two filing cabinets, one of which he'd climbed down moments earlier, after emerging from the ventilation duct above it. Opposite them, the War Leader's desk squatted before a wall dominated by a map of the planet, its continents and seas marked out in stark colours representing the two main factions, the Zenithal Alliance and the Calendal Empire, along with their allies and subsidiaries and the few remaining ostensibly neutral powers.

At present, nobody was around, other than the guards outside the door, who were probably even now wondering uneasily what uncanny noise they'd just heard from the deserted room. The Ministry's work went on, even while the War Leader was asleep, and it wouldn't be long before some administrator came in to drop off or collect some paperwork.

<<<URGENCY>>> It was as if the cloudband had read his mind. Which it was perfectly capable of doing, of course.

'Someone coming?' He pulled out from his rich brocaded jacket the sheaf of surveillance photos that would prove to the Zenithal War Leader once and for all that her enemies, with whom a precarious détente currently held, were preparing for a pre-emptive strike. All he had to do was leave them here, on the desk, where they would be sure to be seen. Paranoia and the forces of history would do the rest.

Patting the rolled-up papers against his palm, he looked thoughtfully up at the map. 'What's the planetary population these days, would you say? Something like four billion? How many of those will survive a nuclear war, do you suppose?'

<<<URGENCY – URGENCY>>>

'Keep your hair on, old son. I told you I'd do it. I signed the treaty myself, remember? We're pledged to protect the Kelda timeline, and this is one of the crux points. No atomic war, no great separation and no recombination. No Kelda – and we all know what *that* means.'

The door-handle rattled. The chair that the Doctor had placed in front of it shifted slightly. The cloudband wasn't having him on about the urgency.

Well, it wasn't as if he was responsible for the war – if normal causality could be trusted, it would have happened quite without his intervention. No, he was only safeguarding history.

'Still,' he mused above the urgent clattering, 'it's as well to be fully aware of what one's doing, don't you think? Mindfulness is a virtue, whether one's filling a pipe or enabling genocide.'

< < < URGENCY – URGENCY – URGENCY > > >

'Oh, I suppose so.' It wasn't as if they'd left him any choice. They never did, any more.

The Doctor dropped the papers onto the War Leader's desk.

With a horrendous squeak, the chair flew across the floor and the guards burst into the empty War Room.

BORROWED TIME

by Jay Eales

Shaped in effigy of the ancient hominid god to whom it was dedicated, the astrathedral hung in uncharted space. Its only companion was a late-stage giant, whose starlight gave the ship's orichalcum sheath the illusion of being soaked in blood. An ill omen, perhaps.

Posed in cruciform fashion, arms splayed like wings, its head upraised to face the future. The god's crown, from a distance, seemed to be adorned by a random selection of decorative charms, but closer inspection revealed them as starships, the diadem a docking ring, and unveiled the grandiose scale of the astrathedral itself. There were four ships in total, but many more docking ports remained idle. The Constant were gathering. They came in many shapes and sizes, but the Constant had at least one thing in common. They did not die.

'Is this all there is?' Ullr, the last Aesir, creaked with every movement. The tightly drawn leather armour, or as likely, the man beneath. Lean to the point of cadaverousness, yet unnaturally red of hair and beard. 'In tourneys past, we had need of runners for the simplest conversations between table-top and end. This is a poor showing.' He surveyed the narthex and ran an appraising eye over his fellow travellers. Atrick the Selebrian he knew from past tourneys. Hopeless player, but a fast friend. Then there was the Prime Sinister, undisputed ruler of the Largo Reach. The gunmetal ammonite armour really brought out the volcanic intensity of her gaze. Ullr pushed back a stray lock of lank hair; his hand came away with red sweat.

Against one of the antechamber walls, an unfamiliar reptilian creature was purposefully scratching symbols on the surfaces. An elderly nun tugged its arm urgently to prevent it from defacing the holy narthex further. The reptile made apologetic gestures, but as she withdrew, it returned to its mark-making, but now drew invisibly in the air. Ullr went to greet the lizardman, but as he offered his arm, he saw the extra mouths upon its palms and froze. It smiled. All three mouths curled upward in unison, revealing a sliver of too-many teeth. Ullr's arm dropped to his side. He dubbed it the Smile.

Ullr's attention returned to the crook-backed nun. 'Sister, I asked if we were the last to attend?'

'I am merely a novitiate, Aesir-Lord,' she apologised, 'You can call me Torygg. In time, if the Uttermost will it, Pater Immediat will bestow upon me that honour.'

'Still a postulant? Odd's beard!' Ullr said, 'Better hope he gets a wriggle on, then. You're not getting any younger, are you?' Seeing her face fall, Ullr continued, 'No offence intended. You mayflies don't get much of a span, I meant. I've had hangovers that lasted as long.'

A cloister bell sounded. Torygg excused herself and left the chamber. Then, Ullr had a moment of clarity. 'That bloody nun still didn't answer my question! How about the rest of you? Anyone know if we've any more players to come?' The

Smile shrugged.

The bell sounded again, and the stone door rolled aside to allow a succession of novitiates to shuffle into the narthex two by two; each pair guided a floating translucent disc between them. Once a chain of five discs were in place, the novitiates halted, heads lowered. The discs pulsed with pastel cream light. At the next bell, Pater Immediat Nonsuch made his presence felt. Rotund and hairless, with pale unblemished skin. The trappings of his office were a quilted fabric shirt and trouser combination in rose gold, topped with a slim white tabard stretching to his bare ankles. His liturgical collar was an ornate affair, a polished orichalcum beard, echoing the Uttermost's likeness on the astrathedral's facia.

Nonsuch stepped from disc to disc assuredly. Once his bare foot left one, novitiates in his wake trotted to replace the disc at the front.

Nonsuch was barely a quarter of the way into the antechamber when Ullr spoke up. 'Shall we just come to you? Not even immortals have time to burn.' He tapped the floating disc that Nonsuch stood upon. 'How long since you set your foot on honest soil, Nonsuch?'

'One must remain above the mundane in order to attain the spiritual.'

'I jest,' Ullr patted Nonsuch's foot, drawing gasps from several novitiates. 'All I mean is that some among us have known you longer than others, *Pater*. Days when you didn't mind a bit of dirt between your toes. Before...'

'Enough of this,' Nonsuch said too loudly, his pale skin flushed mauve. 'You are here to tourney, and tourney you shall.' He stepped back, novitiates scrambling to put a disc underfoot. Turning on his heel, he struck out for the nave, tabard whipping the air. Novitiates ran without decorum to get ahead of his strides.

Atrick the Selebrian laid his hand on Ullr's shoulder.

'Tell me,' Atrick said, 'The followers of this Uttermost... what do they do to the heretic?'

'Burning, I expect. It's usually the way.'

'That one,' Atrick indicated the retreating Nonsuch, 'he wants to watch you *burn*. You're a god too, yes? What do the Aesir do with the unbeliever?'

'I don't speak for my kin, but for myself? Poker.'

Atrick winced, 'A terrible death, the fire-plunged iron...'

'The *game*,' Ullr barked, 'I take them for everything they have.'

As the Constant congregated in the sanctuary, where Nonsuch had prepared the game board, they missed the late arrival. Even the astrathedral sensarrays failed to detect their approach until they breached the docking port, because while the others travelled by ship, the newcomer had walked.

* * *

The Doctor woke in the tank again. The anaesthetic gel was designed to prevent it, but his resistance grew with each healing bath. He could feel the microscopic seamsters beneath his skin, stitching him together again, good as new. Only, it wasn't as good as new anymore. He felt as threadbare as his favourite waistcoat. His limp was now for real, not just for theatre. Only he could hear the loneliness of his heartbeat. His hair was almost the same colour as the powdered wig he used to favour.

Psychosomatic, they said, that he felt the aches of every injury inflicted upon him; every stab wound, agoniser blast and concussion. At first, they suppressed memories, cauterising each connection, but that made things worse. The usual form of renewal was no option for him or his fellow agents. The random process could turn the perfect spy into a pacifist or an imbecile. So, he suffered. The deepest wound was inflicted by his own people. They set him impossible missions, expecting a silk purse from their sow's ear. When a miracle wasn't forthcoming, they killed a world. Without hesitation or remorse. He'd crawled over the dead to escape. He nearly died – *should have* died. Every casualty was a red mark in his ledger. He lived now to balance the books.

Through the translucent gel, the Doctor saw little, moving blobs of colour as the worker bees went about their business. He kept his thrashing to a minimum in the tank, or they'd increase the anaesthesia and up the wooden hill to Bedfordshire he'd go.

He had grown skilled in translating the images he received into approximate reality; a large electric blue cloud – no, two agents came toward the tank, so he went limp, bobbing with the bubbling currents of oxygenated mucus, listening.

'The man himself,' one said, his voice a touch plummy. The Doctor didn't recognise it. The sound was distorted, but they weren't keeping their voices down.

'A legend, really,' he went on, and the Doctor held in a snort.

'You won't last long as his handler if you go in with that attitude,' the other said, her voice shrill and grating, 'It's a poisoned chalice you've inherited.'

While he'd never heard the voice before, the Doctor recognised her cheery personality as the handler on his most recent mission, filtered through the limitations of his cloudband. He'd called her '49'. Easier to just give them numbers, these anonymous Minds on the other end of the line. They rarely invited him round for sherry.

'I was hoping you might have some advice for me. This will be my first live placement,' said the man the Doctor was already thinking of as '50'.

'Your first? Someone up there has it in for you. Don't take your eyes off him for an instant or he'll be away with the key to your Type 40 and end up who knows where or when.'

'You're exaggerating.'

49 brought her face right up to the glass. 'The Techs will tell you the cloudbands are glitchy. Idiots. In my experience, when the signal goes on the fritz, it's *him*. He's up to something.'

'Doesn't that sound a little... well, paranoid?'

'That's what *they* said. You'll learn. He's an addict. Did they brief you about his ledger? He keeps score of lives lost and saved. Every life he takes weighed against those he can save. It's his narcotic of choice. Makes him trigger-shy. Oh, one more thing to remember,' 49 said, '*never*, under *any* circumstances, laugh at his jokes. It only encourages him.'

Everyone's a critic, thought the Doctor.

* * *

Warpostles mustered in the nave as the cloister bell tolled continually. At Pater

Immediat's instruction, the troopers stormed the narthex, ready for anything.

Anything but the single figure that stood unthreateningly in the middle of the hall. Humanoid, dressed from top to toe in a seamless black suit that hid any clue to gender or identifying features. And apparently proof against hard vacuum.

Inside the sanctuary, Torygg replayed the exterior camera feed for Nonsuch, while the players looked on from the back of the sanctuary.

The figure walked determinedly towards the astrathedral, powerful limbs pistoning, untroubled by its environment.

'Does anyone recognise our uninvited guest?'

The Smile gave a head tilt and blinked. Atrick shook his head while Ullr remained uncharacteristically silent. Only the Prime Sinister had anything to impart.

'Whoever they are, that's a voidsuit they're wearing. I was unaware that anyone had built one that worked yet.' She was more engaged than they'd ever seen. 'I'd ask for a boon if I may, Pater Immediat? If it comes to hostilities, please try not to damage it. I would very much like to examine it.'

'Did you just call dibs?' said Ullr.

Nonsuch ignored Ullr's jeer. 'I cannot promise.'

'I'll wager three weights on the stranger,' Ullr said.

'Can you last an hour without gambling?'

'Bet I can,' Ullr patted his purse.

'PATER IMMEDIAT!' The face of a warpostle filled every screen.

'Yes? Have you subdued the intruder yet?'

'No, Pater. There is no intruder...'

'No intruder? Are you blind, man?'

'They have an invitation, Pater.' The warpostle stood aside to reveal the stranger, palm raised, holding a holocrystal; a three-dimensional dodecahedral representation of the church seal rotated lazily above the crystal. Nonsuch's hairless brow furrowed.

The stranger tapped the hologram, which unfolded into an invitation. Everyone focused on the important part – the addressee's name.

The Smile doubled down on its protective charm weaving.

'*Mountweazel*,' Ullr said, 'Oh.'

* * *

It was a standard assignment for the Doctor, insofar as any were. Get in, destabilise the incumbent regime and get out. Sometimes he was privy to the big picture, but mostly he had to take it on trust, something he had in short supply.

He'd kicked over the hornet nest and deposed the queen. Now all he had to do was slip away through the chaos of headless workers milling about the hive without fresh orders. Workers whose last instruction was to kill him. It was snowing again; he was grateful for the fur greatcoat he'd liberated from a guard. Even so, the chill had quickly seeped into his joints, and he leaned heavily upon his cane.

In the two and a half minutes the Doctor had access to their systems, he'd

managed to banjax the blast shields and ground the ornithopter fleet, but the watchbuoys were still operational; their searchlights cut across the plaza. Much as he loved a spotlight, there was a time and a place. Pressed against the brutalist architecture, preparing to run for the next bit of cover. He felt tremors through his boot soles; the pavement erupted, pushed aside by the emergent drillhead of a burrowing warbot; all telescopic metal tendrils and plate armour. He'd got nothing to breach that, and their electro-brains were too primitive to try talking it to death. If it locked on, there'd be no evading it.

As it shook itself free of the burrow, rubble showered the ground. The drill-topped head rotated, scanning the plaza for targets.

The Doctor sent a thought to his handler through the cloudband, in case 50 had any bright ideas. At least he could do that silently, without the warbot.

The warbot's head snapped back; its unblinking eye met the Doctor's.

* * *

'Yes?' Mountweazel said, their response a choir of ever-shifting voices, female, male and other, each jockeying for primacy.

'I thought you'd be... more...,' Atrick gesticulated, appraising the newcomer, '*biggerer*.'

'Often,' Mountweazel replied. Their voidsuit, hauntingly black at distance, was different at close quarters. Oil-slick, the smooth surface rippled with rainbow-hued life under shiplight.

Ullr wanted to trail his fingers over the surface, but he wanted to keep them. They'd all heard the legends. If they were to be believed, Mountweazel was of the elder races, a Basilisk. None could look upon them and live, they said. Said by those that didn't look. Old as the Constant were, Mountweazel's civilisation rose and set before them; only tantalising ruins and tenth-hand reports commemorated their passage.

Nonsuch had despatched the invitation beacon without expectation. He'd sent it in order that he might tell others that he had. Let them wonder if Pater Immediat held more influence than they knew. A stellar message in a bottle, but the Uttermost had guided its path.

The Constant took their seats around the game board. Nonsuch ushered Mountweazel to the Seat of Chance. The Smile took the furthest station from them and would not raise its gaze in their direction. As host, Nonsuch had the Master's Seat, raised above the others, denoting his status. Ullr and the Prime Sinister filled out the remaining spaces.

Torygg and another novitiate stood ready with refreshments for the players. Mother's Milk, the ambrosia of the gods. Ullr drank as though they might take it away from him and called for more. The Prime Sinister waved the novitiate away. Mountweazel accepted but left their glass untouched.

As each player entered the tourney, they placed their right arm flat against the seat and bound themselves into a gaming gauntlet. As the clasps locked with a satisfying click, their quadrant of the table sprang to life. The gauntlets moved freely but were tethered to the chairs by orichalcum cables.

Except for Nonsuch. As gamesmaster, his gauntlet was unbound; he was free to move from disc to disc around the table. As each player powered up, their champions appeared within the arena. Nonsuch consulted his tablet. The Prime Sinister gave him pause at first, but he dismissed it and moved on. His furrowed brow smoothed and rose as Mountweazel activated their quadrant. The electronic hum seemed significantly higher in pitch than the others. Nonsuch almost smiled.

'This champion of yours,' Nonsuch asked Mountweazel, 'what do you call them?'

'*Doctor.*'

* * *

It felt as though the Doctor's insides were being pulled and pushed from their preferred positions. It was nothing the warbot was doing.

His sight was next, as the plaza and onrushing robot went in and out of focus. His heartbeat spiked and his footing shifted, and everything went black. The sound of the watchbuoys overhead and the pounding of robot treads on plascrete faded to silence. He felt the touch of the vortex.

Deaf and blind, the Doctor had firm footing, at least. That was something to build on. No longer snowing, the temperature was up at least twenty degrees. He waved his hand in front of his face, and there was a clicking sound overhead, followed by the triggering of a series of striplights.

Gentle illumination filled the room. Boxy, with a single exit at the far left, and speaker horns mounted in the corners. *Good job, 50*, he sent by cloudband; several seconds' delay before transmission told him he was far from home. However he'd been snatched away, it was unfamiliar technology. Primitive, yet powerful enough to transmat over vast distances. Puzzling. His people favoured finesse over brute force. Sweating, he shucked off his borrowed greatcoat. The braided dolman jacket beneath it was a recent affectation, adopted under duress after wearing its much-loved predecessor to death.

Eventually, a response arrived.

<<<QUERYSIGN LOCATION>>>

Conversation was infuriatingly slow for someone used to letting their mouth run away with them. It did allow the Doctor to investigate the empty room to within an inch of its life. The speakers concealed hologenerators. The ceiling tiles were electrified. Faint scrapes indicated that something had been dragged across the floor.

50 was as much in the dark as the Doctor. The cloudband gave them an anchor, and they hoped to piggy-back the link to boost its sensors. As to retrieving him, well, one step at a time.

A sonorous bell tolled from horn to horn around the room, and a spectral face crackled into holographic life from each one. Pale-faced, it spoke from behind a collar shaped like a golden beard.

'Greetings, lower beings! I am Nonsuch, Pater Immediat of the Uttermost. You have reached the apex of your brief lives. The Constant honour you as their champions in the Grand Tourney. Prevail, and your reward shall be measureless.

Fall short, but show mettle for the entertainment of the Constant, and your deeds shall echo forever. Bore us, and it shall be as though your eye-blink of existence had never been...'

The Doctor stopped listening at this point, focusing instead on what he could see behind Nonsuch as he held forth. Glimpsed architecture and unfamiliar faces. Nothing immediately useful, but preferable to Nonsuch's bluster. He'd heard enough variations on the theme. Immortals really were the worst.

* * *

The Smile's champion was eliminated first. A larger member of the same species, its brute force failed against a floor that slid away from the exit. On the holo-display, the Constant watched it tumble into the void. One quadrant of the game board went dark. The Smile scrabbled wildly in its chair, attempting to make air sigils, but the cables kept jerking it back.

'All for the Uttermost!' Nonsuch said and stabbed at his tablet.

'I'll drink to that,' Ullr said, snatching the jug and serving himself.

The Prime Sinister leaned forward to watch the chair sink into the sanctuary floor, the Smile hissing and writhing all the way down until the floor plate slid over it. Atrick shifted in his seat, while Mountweazel remained unfathomable.

'No-one needs to see a bad loser,' said Nonsuch.

'I hope there's a warpostle down there to throw it back on its ship or something,' Atrick said.

'Something,' Nonsuch said.

* * *

Because the Doctor hadn't waited for the broadcast to finish, he had plenty of time to stroll across the room and examine the door lock. A tentative rap with his cane revealed that the handle wasn't booby-trapped. He had five tools that could spring it at a pinch, but trying the handle, it was unlocked.

He stepped through just as Nonsuch's briefing concluded at last. The silence was broken by a mechanical clunk as the door bolt shot, and the grinding as the floor retracted away from the doorway. *The early bird catches the worm*, the Doctor thought, relieved to be this side of the door when it locked. Never mind the yawning pit opening up, Nonsuch might start talking again.

The room beyond was a panopticon; six doors for six champions. The Doctor reconsidered his odds.

As each door opened, the Doctor greeted the newcomers. First, a robot with decorative fossil-plated chassis blew out the door lock – didn't even try the handle. No conversationalist.

Leaping into the room aided by jet propulsion was some sort of interplanetary boy scout, jumpsuit coated with pouches. He took the Doctor's outstretched hand eventually but withheld his name. Jetpack Guy it was, then.

A young tribesman hung from the handle of the next door, scrabbling to find purchase on the floor before his grip failed. The young warrior clawed his way inside and leant back against the door, massaging feeling into his muscles. He was Selebrian, given his still-livid tribal scars.

A gangly creature swung down from the lintel, startling Jetpack Guy. Amphibian, it had clammy yellow skin, rudimentary gills and sunken pools for eyes. The woollen jumper with reinforced elbows and baggy synthetic vinyl jodhpurs it wore seemed an incongruous choice.

'Hello, old son,' said the Doctor, between bites of an apple. He'd tried sparking up his pipe, but they'd put something in the air to prevent it from lighting. The beasts.

That windbag Nonsuch piped up again. Between patronising aggrandisements, the Doctor teased out what he needed. He and his peers were champions in a contest for the amusement of immortals. First to the chancel won. The prize, Nonsuch was *evasive* about. One player – a Cholot, if he knew his reptilians – was already eliminated. That tracked with the empty room. He affixed the provided commbutton behind his ear, so his patron Mountweazel could advise. Just what he needed – another voice in his head.

* * *

'A jetpack?' Atrick rounded on Ullr.

'Nothing against it in the rules,' Ullr grinned, 'Don't blame me for choosing a champion with something more useful than good muscle definition.'

'So much for your big words about leaving things to chance. Some luck god you are.'

'All these tourneys, and you still don't get it,' Ullr said. 'We make our own fortune.' Saluting Atrick with his glass, he drained it in a single swallow.

Atrick slammed his fist down on the game board, the image glitching. 'I don't care for this company. I concede.'

'That,' Nonsuch said, 'will *not* be possible.' He drew a finger across his tablet.

'You can't keep me against my will.' Atrick strained against the cables.

'Calm down,' Ullr said. 'Play your hand. Maybe your luck will turn.'

The sound of gunfire cut across the sanctuary. The Prime Sinister was surveying the game arena.

Everyone turned to face the game board as the holofield brought the scene into sharp focus. Atrick's tribesman was on the floor, along with much of his blood. The Prime Sinister's robot stood over him, arm extended, smoking gun ports sprouting from its endoskeleton.

The other champions fled into the maze of corridors as soon as the flechettes started flying.

As Atrick's quadrant went dark, the Prime Sinister returned to her seat. 'Problem solved.'

* * *

Inside the arena, all pretence of gamesmanship evaporated. ‘Race for the Prize’ became ‘Last One Standing’.

The Doctor’s cloudband buzzed as he skulked about the bulkheads. A pending download. He blinked his assent and the transmission blossomed in his mind, sending fireworks in front of his eyes. Burnt toast or synapses filled his nostrils and he had to hold onto a girder until he could see straight.

50 had been a busy little bee. Their wizard wheeze of giving the cloudband sensors a kick up the jacksie had paid off in spades, or rather in floorplans. The range gave him a room or two in all directions around him; the equivalent of seeing a card before the turn. For the first time since his arrival, the Doctor felt he had an element of control. A pulsing green symbol screamed *you are here*. Better yet, red symbols popped up when a rival skirted close enough to ping him.

One of them – the amphibian, he thought – had found a way into the level above, so the Doctor went down instead, finding chambers filled with venting pipes. He pressed on whenever red grew too close.

Blue symbols started to flag up. Cautious investigation showed them to be non-combatants. Mostly bipedal, but multi-species; their commonality was white robes and gender. Nuns.

They didn’t like it when he stepped out from behind a pipe to say hello, scurrying in all directions. Before he could decide whether to be offended, a red symbol pinged him, and he knew he should keep moving. It never occurred to him that he was being herded until too late. Suddenly there was another red marker ahead, and the one that had been dancing at sensors’-edge turned up like a bad penny, approaching at pace. Jetpack Guy, and he’d teamed up with Big, Bad and Robotic. For someone who could find at least three exits for any circumstance, this time he was stumped. Cursing, he thumbed the top of his cane, unsheathing his swordstick.

The exits ahead and behind him exploded. The robot stepped through the debris from the fusillade that turned a door to ruin, while Jetpack Guy bobbed through the molten hole his energy cannon had made.

‘Does no-one knock anymore?’ the Doctor said, his ears ringing. As the air filled with charged plasma and flechettes, the Doctor ducked down and closed his eyes.

The Doctor opened his eyes. Ruin surrounded him: flechette-ripped metal wall to his right, and the melted remnants of a ruptured pipe to the left. He was untouched, somehow. He recovered first. *There.* A third exit. Diving into the open pipe before they could have another crack at him, he felt searing pain as his thigh brushed the still-incandescent metal of the pipe on the way. Better than the alternative.

* * *

‘Disqualification!’ The Prime Sinister was on her feet again, appealing to Pater Immediat.

Mountweazel stood over the game board, where the Doctor had just made his miraculous escape. Their outstretched hands were smoking, and the one not

protected by a gauntlet was blistered. The voidsuit glove had been breached in several places like tobacco burns. Light burst from the pinpricks like a sun through muslin. Mountweazel flexed their fingers and rubbed them against the meat of their arm. Within seconds, the voidsuit punctures healed over as though they'd never been there.

Ullr joined in with the baying. The time for deception had passed now that his alliance with the Prime Sinister was in the open. 'Mountweazel or not, this can't stand.' He and the Prime Sinister took turns berating the confused gamesmaster.

Nonsuch had no idea how Mountweazel had interacted with the arena at all. The game gauntlets incorporated rudimentary bio-feedback to let players share an emotional hit from their champions. But it was as though the Basilisk had reached into the arena to shield his champion, manifesting physical damage as a result. An impossibility, but according to the tablet, Mountweazel's energy levels spiked off the scale. Nonsuch could not lose such a bounty, when the energy offered by the others proved small beer indeed.

Mountweazel sang/spoke, and for the first time, their voices were disharmonious. Some called for *apology*, while others sang *compromise*.

'Unacceptable,' Ullr said, facing off against Mountweazel; at least he assumed it was a face under the featureless mask.

'How long,' Mountweazel sang, 'since your last worshipper died?'

Ullr hesitated; his throat was suddenly dry. The hunger that never left his sunken eyes threatened to devour him. Mother's Milk took the edge off, but he was starving. A bead of red sweat rolled lazily from his hairline. His vanity exposed for all to see. 'You're a fine one to talk,' he said, 'your kind were dead and forgotten aeons past! We have only your word as to your heritage, the word of a *cheat*.' Ullr had found some hidden reserve of spirit. 'Prove your truth. Show me your face. And when I've faced down a *legend*, you can walk back to whatever meteorite you crawled from under.'

'*Enough*, Ullr,' Nonsuch said.

'It's the Milk talking,' said the Prime Sinister. 'Sit down.'

'I'm no raven starver,' Ullr said, dismissing all dissent. 'What say you, Mountweazel?'

'*Acceptable.*' Mountweazel stood so that only the Norse god could see, pressed an index finger to their forehead and slowly traced a line across. Where the finger passed, the mask bubbled, sparks bursting from within.

Ullr looked away before he could see more than a glimpse, defeated. He dashed his glass to the floor; the detonation sent milk dregs and plastic shards flying. He slunk to his seat and would not raise his gaze until Mountweazel had sealed the voidsuit.

'*Compromise?*' Mountweazel repeated.

Ullr grunted his assent. 'I'm no raven starver,' he said under his breath, but no-one was listening to him anymore.

* * *

The Doctor was beset on all sides by nuns. Ordinarily, he'd have been concerned, but Nonsuch's hologram had called a brief halt to proceedings, after player

interference. The Doctor's miraculous escape came courtesy of his mysterious patron, Mountweazel. A yellow card offence, but the Doctor had to bear the forfeit.

Was the worst part that the gravboots, cranked up to standard gravity plus three, made every step laborious, or that the overshoes covered the fine jackboots he'd chosen to set off his ensemble just so? It was the former, except when he looked down. No more pipe-diving for him. He wasn't happy, but he didn't intend to punch any nuns to prevent it, and they seemed to be the only options. His kneecap screamed with every step, but better a moving target than a sitting duck.

Passing through some sort of reactor room, the Doctor paused beside the still dark waters of a coolant pool. Under the half-light, his reflection looked even worse than he felt. Air bubbles gave him a second's warning before the amphibian broke surface, reaching for his throat.

Unbalanced by the gravboots, the Doctor barely lurched back in time, unsheathing his swordstick. The amphibian was empty-handed, but the Doctor clocked a wicked-looking thorn protruding from its left palm. A voice in his head – Mountweazel's or his own, he wasn't sure – told him to stay well away from *that*.

The amphibian was fast, but the Doctor's sword gave him reach. At a button-press, the blade grew longer still, striking sparks from the floor. Circling each other, seeking weakness. The amphibian took to the walls, skittering for advantage. The Doctor went one-handed, crouching to work with his lockpicks whenever he had more than a moment's respite. He'd get close, the levers tantalising him, then have to parry an opportunistic swipe from the Dunwich Horror, driving it off before he could start again. Too close – the amphibian's thorn nicked his palm, but his glove held. Wriggling his toes, he got a foot free, and with the next lunge, the amphibian got a faceful of gravboot. But the creature was on him again. Too close to bring the sword to bear, it was all he could do to keep the thorn away from his face. A glancing blow: his sword clattered away. For want of anything better, the Doctor brandished the gravboot as a flail. Exhausted, he knew he'd only got a couple more swings in him. He feinted more, drawing his opponent toward the coolant tank. The amphibian obliged but reached with a webbed hand to splash brackish water into the Doctor's eyes, just as he hefted the boot toward its head. The boot fell short, but thumped into its chest, making it sit heavily.

Blinking filthy water away, the Doctor held it down, scrabbling inside the boot cuff. He found a dial and spun it as far as it would go. The creature wheezed as the suddenly much heavier boot forced air from its lungs. It pawed ineffectually at the immoveable object. The Doctor couldn't miss the pleading in the sunken pools of its eyes. He also saw its palm-thorn straining toward him. He hesitated. Grabbing the amphibian's legs, he yanked them up, causing it to tumble backwards into the pool. The boot inexorably dragged it into the depths. Air bubbles slowed, finally stopped. It had gills of a sort, *maybe* had a shot at rolling from under the gravboot before it struck bottom.

The Doctor added another red mark to his tally anyway.

* * *

‘Bad luck, Nonsuch,’ Ullr said, unable to keep from smiling as the third quadrant went dark. ‘It looks as though it won’t be *all for the Uttermost* after all. Your godpuppet will just have to slumber a little longer.’ He winked.

‘Watch your tongue, Aesir Lord. I am still tourney master here.’ Nonsuch glared at him. ‘And I’ll thank you not to sully the ineffable nature of the Uttermost, here of all places.’

‘Oh, Nonsuch,’ Ullr said, ‘maybe you’ve forgotten, but I remember Lyssa Prime. And Omphal. I could quote verse to make your nuns’ ears burn. Play your games for their sake if you must, but I know the real you. You’re *Constant*. You don’t change.’

Torygg gasped. The Pater had stepped down from his disc and taken a fistful of Ullr’s creaky leather jerkin, close to his throat. He was full of godly fire.

‘Ullr Oathbreaker. In all the lifetimes I have known you, I’ve never known you to deal truly. You weight your knucklebones even when dicing against children. Your company is corrosive.’ Nonsuch raised his fist, dragging Ullr to his feet. ‘But do not doubt me when I say that my faith is uncorruptible. My faith is forever. All for the Uttermost.’

Nonsuch stabbed at his tablet, and the chairs of the vanquished contestants rose back up out of the floor. Atrick and the Smile had not been returned to their ships as promised. Their husks remained clamped to the chairs by their game gauntlets, every last drop of their immortal lifeforce drained. Atrick’s veins stood proud and purpled. ‘It’s better when you don’t struggle,’ Nonsuch said, ‘but for once in your existence, you get to serve a greater purpose.’

Before Ullr could protest further, Nonsuch made a twisting gesture on the touchpad and let go of him; Ullr groaned and crumpled onto his seat. The Prime Sinister scrabbled at her game gauntlet, servo-assisted armour struggling to find purchase. From deep within the astrathedral came a tortured grinding of metal against metal, the protestation of long-idle gears struggling into motion. The bells were tolling again. ‘*All.* For the Uttermost.’

* * *

Pushing through the stuffy intra-level crawlspace, glimpsing through ventilation grates, the Doctor saw the robot’s legs first. He froze, but there was nothing else of it to see. Everything above its waist had been obliterated, leaving the ragged tell-tale melt pattern of an energy cannon. There he was – Jetpack Guy, facing away from him. He’d abandoned his signature equipment, wrecked by flechette fire by the look of it. He’d slung the cannon across his back in its place.

From the boiling ion stink misting the air, the cannon had recently fired. The Doctor pushed the grate aside, the sound masked by the ambient noise of the room. The nearer they got to the prize, the louder the beating heart of the arena got. No better chance. He hauled himself up into the room.

* * *

‘You dare betray *me*?’ the Prime Sinister screeched, and with her left hand, ripped off the decorative ammonite motif on her pauldron, a concealed weapon.

Ullr’s eyes widened as the muzzle swung toward his face. ‘Your problem’s with *me?*’ he nodded at Nonsuch, ‘For Odd’s sake, shoot *him*!’

Too late. The Prime Sinister’s head fell forward, as though she’d been unplugged, which she had, Nonsuch operating the switch. Her quadrant darkened.

‘Barely a mouthful in her,’ Nonsuch said, confiscating the weapon and forcing down the Prime Sinister’s rigid arm. ‘*That*,’ he said with a sneer, ‘was no Constant. Just a machine with a head for a hat.’

* * *

Jetpack Guy was not as oblivious as appearances suggested. He turned, unslung the cannon, and brought it to bear on the Doctor with practised ease.

‘Not another step.’ He patted the cannon. ‘Nobody else needs to die.’

He’d acquired a passkey from somewhere. Golden ticket to the chancel, the final chamber. A novitiate lay at his feet, robes stained red.

‘I appreciate the gesture,’ the Doctor said, ‘empty though it is.’ He took a step forward. ‘Just like that cannon. If you could keep me talking for... five more minutes, it’d be a different matter.’ Another step. ‘Even a lame old dog like me could close the distance sooner than that.’ Two steps nearer. The floor plates started to rumble.

Jetpack Guy let the cannon hang from its strap, magicking a Stickiboom grenade from a pouch. He thumbed the activator cap. ‘Last chance.’

The Doctor raised his hands, palms forward, though keeping hold of his cane. His gloves were no longer white.

Brandishing the grenade as he backed up to the door, JPG fumbled with the passkey and the lock. He missed the Doctor’s button-press. The door opened, and Jetpack Guy ducked into the chancel with a parting comment. ‘Maybe we’ll meet again, but know this. Today, you owe your life to Hraddigan Vo.’

Hraddigan Vo? The Doctor preferred Jetpack Guy.

As soon as the door closed, the Doctor started running. The rumbling rose to a roar. He slipped a key blank from his pocket chain, made from alien mimetal he’d *acquired* from a Forgeworld. Planting his staff in front of the door, he slammed the blank on the top. He pressed a stud and the mimetal responded to the surreptitious recording of Vo’s genuine key inserted into the barrel, working the pins. In seconds, a perfect copy was in the Doctor’s hand, and shortly after, an open door.

The Doctor pitched into the chancel with such haste, he tripped over Vo’s body.

* * *

‘You snake!’ Ullr bellowed at the gamesmaster, ‘A booby-trap? You never meant for us to win, did you?’

‘Of course not,’ Nonsuch said. ‘Once you sat at my table, your fate was fixed.’

‘Why draw it out, then?’ Ullr asked, ‘You had us in chains. Why not drain us in a single draught and be done with it?’

‘Hungry for the gallows, Ullr?’ Nonsuch said. ‘It won’t have escaped your notice that this tourney is rather less grand than times past.’ Bare feet slapping the tiles, Nonsuch drew closer to Ullr. ‘We’re the last. Constant no longer. You’ve felt it, I know. Henna can’t hide your white beard forever, old wolf.’

Ullr didn’t argue. He was last of the Aesir, a god without worshippers. The tourney was his last wheel-spin. He’d fancied that in victory, more than a few of Nonsuch the potlicker’s idolaters would abandon their false idol and follow him.

‘Yes, I could have drained you all from the off, spaced your champions and been about my business,’ Nonsuch said, snatching up a refreshment jug, ‘but I had to take care with such meagre fare.’ He began pouring Mother’s Milk into a glass. ‘I dared not waste a drop. Until my prayers were answered.’ He stroked Mountweazel’s head. ‘Such vitality! And all for the Uttermost.’ He poured until the glass was brimming and kept on, milk cascading everywhere.

That roused Ullr from his torpor. He railed at Mountweazel. ‘Have you nothing to say? He’ll feed you to his god.’ Straining at his leash, he meant to shake the Basilisk, to get a reaction besides sitting like an animal for the slaughterman. ‘Make a statue of him – unmask yourself!’

‘*In time*,’ Mountweazel sang, remaining seated, to Ullr’s disgust.

‘The Uttermost applauds your sacrifice. Fitting that the Constant should be the engine of his return.’

‘Where *is* this sleeping god of yours?’ Ullr said, ‘Skulking within a black hole?’

Nonsuch smiled. It didn’t suit him. ‘Do you not feel him all around you? Every step, you step on *him*. This is no mere astrathedral to glorify the Uttermost. It is his holy vestments; he, its beating heart.’

The sound of shifting stone and rending metal filled the sanctuary. Shortly after, the cloister bells joined in.

‘Do you hear? He stirs.’

* * *

Hraddigan Vo’s body sprawled before a dais, surprise-etched features, charred hands, and a lingering cooked meat odour. Ahead was an altar, topped with an arched stone centrepiece with an orichalcum gong and the carved motto: VICTORI SUNT SPOLIA. *To the winner the spoils*, the Doctor thought. *CAVEAT EMPTOR was more apposite*.

It took him fourteen seconds to locate and disarm the trap, but then, he had a big corpse-shaped reminder not to go banging gongs willy-nilly. Again, he owed his life to Hraddigan Vo.

* * *

‘*Now*.’ Mountweazel sang, and rose. Ullr’s own voice trailed off, his point

forgotten. He tried to stand, but legs buckled beneath him; Nonsuch must have him down to the dregs by now. His hand moved at a snail's pace. Time stretched and stopped.

* * *

'It's time, Doctor,' the choir of voices sang inside the Doctor's head. 'We have little time, between tick and tock.' The voice was stronger, clearer, as though Mountweazel was in the –

Mountweazel *was* in the room.

The Doctor masked surprise with nonchalance. 'You took your time. *Mountweazel*, is it? Bit on the nose, I'd say. Reeks of home. Stop me if I take a blind turn. They wanted a seat at this immortal shindig. So they rigged one. Sprinkled a breadcrumb trail throughout history to prop up your legend. I'm your plus-one. How'd I do?' He took silence as acknowledgement.

'A simple choice. Strike the gong and claim your prize, from the hand of Nonsuch himself.'

'What prize?'

'The usual. Power, influence in the coming age, after raising the entity he calls the Uttermost.'

'The alternative?'

Mountweazel indicated to their right, a space formerly empty, but now occupied by a TARDIS. No materialisation, it was just there. 'The key to your cage. Step inside and go anywhere, without pursuit for as long as you live.'

The Doctor's eyebrow arched. 'They'll punish you for this,' he said. 'What about the Uttermost?'

'The usual.'

'You'll deal with it?'

'I cannot,' Mountweazel sang, in minor key. '*You* must choose, and choose now.'

'Must I?' the Doctor snapped. 'Why must these things always fall on my shoulders?'

'Because your shoulders are broadest.'

'Not always!' The Doctor turned his back and stalked toward the TARDIS. The door swung open. Refusing to face Mountweazel, he asked, 'How many deaths if the Uttermost wakes?'

'Trillions.'

Knuckles whitening, he poured his frustration out on the door. Glancing back at the gong, then Mountweazel, he made his choice and stepped inside.

The TARDIS began to dematerialise, but Mountweazel was already gone.

* * *

In the sanctuary, Ullr felt time snap back with a jolt. He gagged, and milky bile splashed his boots.

‘Enough of this,’ said Nonsuch, turning his attention to Mountweazel, sliding the drainer to maximum intensity. ‘All for the Uttermost!’ The astrathedral began to roar with the onrush of energy.

Mountweazel flinched and contorted, but then, their body became smoke, dispersing in the air. The game gauntlet fell to the ground as the body lost cohesion. The roar fell into a disappointed moan.

Nonsuch waddled across, clawing uselessly at the last wisps of the Basilisk. He shook his tablet and tossed it aside. ‘Not enough,’ he cried.

Ullr laughed until there was blood.

Torygg attempted to calm Nonsuch, but was pushed aside. He unbuckled his gauntlet and snapped shut Mountweazel’s in its place. He sank to his knee as the machinery drank his lifeforce. ‘All,’ he spat through gritted teeth, ‘for the Uttermost.’ Again, the sanctuary rang with an exultant roaring.

For a few seconds, the roar became a duet. Ullr rubbed his failing eyes; a grey cylinder suddenly stood where a grey cylinder hadn’t. A door opened and out stepped the Doctor. Mountweazel’s man. He was dressed differently – all powder blue brocade, fancy wig, and smoking a pipe, but there was no mistaking those long features or the way he carried himself. Without his opening his mouth Ullr found him annoying, but knew he’d drive Nonsuch completely mad. Madder.

The Doctor’s pipe went out the second he stepped from the TARDIS. *What was wrong with these people?* Giving the room the once over, he recognised glimpses from Nonsuch’s broadcasts. The faces he recognised had been rather livelier before, not the drained husks they’d become. The chancel he’d just vacated, complete with Hraddigan Vo’s tiny body, was projected over the arena.

The Viking was no threat. Nonsuch perched on the edge of his chair, head held low in his hands. Oblivious. An assassination, then? He began to regret his change of mind. He needn’t even look this one in the eye. What was one more red mark set against trillions? With that racket, he’d hear no approach. It would be quick; he’d make it painless. The Doctor cleared his throat. ‘Sorry I’m late.’

Nonsuch’s head snapped up. ‘Warpostles,’ he bellowed, ‘we’re under attack!’

‘I’m the Doctor, your grand winner. Thought I’d claim my prize in person, shake a few hands, sign some photos and be on my way.’ He did his thing of moving when people took their eye off him.

‘Novitiate Torygg?’ Nonsuch craned toward her. ‘Who is this fool?’

‘Mountweazel’s champion, Pater. First to strike the altar gong…’

‘Second,’ the Doctor interrupted.

Nonsuch looked confused. ‘What about the… *tzzt*?’ He wiggled his fingers.

‘Disabled, Pater.’

Nonsuch humphed.

Seven more steps, the Doctor estimated. He managed one before Nonsuch lifted his free hand. It had a gun in it.

‘Then you must have your prize, Doctor. Drop the stick.’

The Doctor complied, raising his gloved hands unbidden. He’d now need to get even closer. ‘Torygg?’ he asked. ‘Whatever he’s told you, that’s no god he’s waking up. Listen!’

Torygg listened. The guttural noises did not fit her idea of His Bearded Holiness.

‘This draining machine,’ the Doctor said. ‘Is there any way to –’

‘*R-reverse* it?’ Torygg said. ‘The tablet –’

‘Torygg!’ Nonsuch twisted in his seat but could get no clear view of the novitiate while keeping an eye on the Doctor. ‘*Sister* Torygg? That’s your wish, isn’t it? It’s yours. When the Uttermost rises, he will need your service, as you have faithfully served me.’

Torygg snatched up the discarded tablet, fingers clattering across keys. The roar turned to an anguished howl.

‘Give me that,’ Nonsuch snarled. Sensing movement behind him, he turned and fired.

* * *

The Doctor stood stock-still, hands raised, left palm open, the right a clenched fist. The Viking had dragged himself over and wrenched the gun from Nonsuch’s hand and slumped across him.

‘Say the word, and I’ll bite his nose off.’ Ullr looked up. ‘Oh, *you’re* back, are you?’ Mountweazel loomed from the shadows behind Nonsuch, watching.

‘Are you okay, Doctor?’ Torygg asked.

‘Absolutely tickety-boo,’ the Doctor said, ‘while I’ve got these bullet-catchers.’ He opened his fist with a practiced flourish, as he’d done a hundred times before; it always caused gasps when he unveiled the bullet.

His palm was empty. *Oh.*

Torygg gasped.

* * *

Suddenly, the Doctor was on the ground, his gloves red and ruined. He didn’t want to think about his favourite waistcoat. At least that bloody racket had calmed to a dull rumble; an elder god settling down to dream. They were all crouched over him, *fussing*, except Mountweazel.

‘Don’t worry about this,’ the Doctor said, ‘I’ve another... no, hang on, just the one. I’m always forgetting that.’ Then the pain hit; a cut so sharp, it only hurt once you looked.

‘Time for your prize, Doctor,’ Mountweazel sang.

‘Are you going to show me your face?’

‘Yes, but what do you *really* want?’

The Doctor remained silent for a long time, his breath rattling. He’d balanced his books; No red stained his ledger. Eventually, he whispered, ‘Jam roll and custard,’ and died.

* * *

‘*Now.*’ Mountweazel sang and gently placed an index finger on the Doctor’s forehead. Sparks flew, igniting the voidsuit into a raging inferno. Torygg and Ullr

shied away, but the flames produced no heat. Mountweazel's features melted, one moment male, the next female. For a split second, the Doctor's own likeness surfaced, replaced by that of a child. Throughout, sparks shot from their finger, burning through the block within.

Suddenly, the Doctor's body took light, Mountweazel became the fuel, until infinite possibilities collapsed into singularity, two figures into one. Not even charred, the bloodied brocade finery no longer fit. The cloudband crumbled from his wrist.

The new Doctor was shorter, somewhat stockier and moustachioed. Wild-eyed, buttons pinging as he struggled to escape his straining waistcoat; He clutched a hand to his undamaged chest, and felt a comforting rhythm, and a song in his hearts. 'Tea... for two... and two... for tea!'

DOCTOR CROCUS AND THE FACTORY OF THE FUTURE

by Nicole Petit

The world changed in 1970 when meteorites fell from the sky. They crashed into a landscape starved of colour, bringing with them the whole spectrum's grace. As word spread, it opened Britain's eyes to an exciting – and perhaps terrifying – new universe.

It's said that the enterprising head of Nesston Plastics was out for a walk and witnessed a cluster of chondrite crashing into the Essex woods. Mr Nesston found the meteorites and within them something that revolutionised his industry. Within a matter of months, Nesston became the foremost manufacturer of plastic products. Never content to rest, he set his sights further – toward the future of automation and production itself. Toward a world without human workers.

* * *

The Doctor strode into his ship with a hearty laugh and a twirl of his cane. 'Ah, nothing like the raucous inventive spirit of the Victorian age to make a man feel alive, eh, Chuckaboo?' The golden top of his cane gave a brief, sputtering flicker of light. The Doctor frowned and held it up for inspection. 'Come now, don't be like that. You didn't enjoy yourself catching Lord Walter's runaway zebra-drawn carriage? A variable riot of stripes. We grappled the Fighting Ghost of Tondu – wasn't that fun? Could two Victorian gentlemen, such as ourselves, have a better time?'

His sonic cane gave a high pitched whine.

The Doctor moved to his ship's console, starting up the engines. 'Yes, yes, I know you prefer it when we have someone else around. I will grant you that we had a grand time with Isambard Kingdom Brunel, all three Alexandre Dumases, Varne, and of course dear Ada and Charles... But there are benefits to the life of a solitary traveller and his cane.' He paused, considering, then quickly moved on. 'I'll figure them out as we go. How about the Great Exhibition of 1851?' Just as he hit in the coordinates, Chuckaboo lit up and whirred. Like a player piano preparing for the next song, the display rolled over. 1851 was gone, replaced with a most unsatisfactory date.

The Doctor crossed his arms and frowned. 'Earth, Nineteen Seventy. Not really my year, Chuckaboo.'

The cane gave a sharp whirr. The control room's speakers sprung to life, blaring an advertisement.

'MALLEABLE! VERSATILE! Plastic polymers have already transformed our world, but Nesston Plastics promises more with the FACTORY OF THE FUTURE! See for yourself the revolutionary techniques that will make Mr Nesston a household name.'

The Doctor glanced at the display, then Chuckaboo. 'Well, I can't say I don't

admire the showmanship of a good announcer. I hope their factory lives up to the promise.'

* * *

Fastidiously tended and surrounded by a moat, the garden added life to an industrial park. The Doctor landed his ship beneath the boughs of a tree, just at the water's edge.

Bright as the future and tall as the imagination, the factory towered above him. It rose from a pillar. Four lightweight plastic wings – white and gleaming – were cantilevered from the core. The wings were not confined by right angles. Curving in gentle ridges, like a snapshot of a billowing sea. Where the wings met, windows glittered – large and small, arranged into space-age patterns. Saffron lights shone from within. Spindly supports extended from each wing, anchoring the factory to the ground below. Then it dawned upon the Doctor. It was plastic, all of it. From the base, to the wings, and beyond – it was made solely of the most revolutionary materials. The Doctor glanced down at Chuckaboo. 'Nesston's Factory of the Future, is it? The architecture is certainly ahead of its time. Let's see how they handled the interior, hm?'

The brightly coloured glass panel doors slid open with a satisfying hiss. The Doctor strode in with a dramatic sweep of his cape. Chuckaboo spouted a colourful array of sparks. But, alas, there was no audience for his trick. He frowned at the empty lobby. It was pleasant enough; the white walls were impeccably clean and accented with posters proclaiming such things as: *NESSTON CREATES MIRACLES FROM MOLECULES!* Everything from the style of the art to the furnishings had the sharp angles of humanity's future. And all of it slick, sturdy plastic. From the ceiling hung strange polyhedron lanterns, glowing soft purple. In the centre of it all stood an information desk, large enough to hold several workers and still comfortably fit all the welcome pamphlets, samples, registers – and yet there wasn't a single soul.

'Not much of a crowd,' the Doctor grumbled. 'Have they gone and automated customer service as well, forgotten the charm of a personal touch?' He made his way around the counter, looking in vain for any sign of life. He did, however, find a service bell which he tapped with the end of his cane. The pleasant ring echoed through the lobby and into the hallways beyond.

The determined ***Click. Click. Click.*** of heels heralded a sharply dressed woman. Her navy blue suit captured a vibrant hue that would have stood out in any crowd; the fabric had the same sparkling gleam as the plastics around her. Keenly tailored, perfectly fitted, it was an outfit made exclusively for the woman of the future. From the wide white collar, to her smartly styled hair, to the pillbox hat which rested atop it.

'Hello, and welcome to Nesston's Factory of the Future: Moulding and Shaping Our World Today.' Her warm voice carried clear across the lobby. She smiled, but it didn't quite reach her eyes, which observed him with a sharpness.

The Doctor, never one to turn down an audience (no matter how small), threw his arms open wide. His cane stayed right where he left it, standing upright. 'Ah, hello!' He paused, catching sight of her name tag which simply read, *Ness.* 'I am Doctor Cornelius Crocus. May I call you Nessie?'

Her smile stayed put, but her eyes narrowed just slightly. ‘Certainly, *sir*.’

‘Oh, let’s be informal. Call me the Doctor.’ He raised his hat. ‘Well, my friend and I caught wind of your tours and thought it might be a bit novel to get a glimpse of the future, eh, Chuckaboo?’

Ness sucked in a breath and tried to straighten her already perfect jacket as she looked for his friend. With a snap of the Doctor’s fingers, the cane leapt to his hand.

‘Meet Chuckaboo! Not one for shaking hands, but he’s glad to meet you all the same!’

Ness didn’t even flinch, attention flicking to the cane before glancing back up at the showman himself with the same sharpness as before.

‘Oh, how charming!’ Her tone was pleasant, and yet the Doctor suspected she’d found his trick anything but. ‘If it’s a glimpse of the future you’re looking for, that is something Nesston Plastics can certainly provide.’

The tour began in a long glass tunnel. Polyhedron lamps led the way. On either side, factory lines stretched out beyond what they could see.

On their left, the process began. Nozzles emerged from above. Pale, pink plastic squeezed out in long strips. Stamps emerged from the mechanism, pressing the material into shape. When the stamps parted, doll parts fell free and onto the belts below. Legs, torsos, heads.

On their right, the finished dolls passed by with perfect precision.

While the mechanisms were wondrous enough, the Doctor realised something else. Opaque gears turning the belts were certainly not made of metal. Everything was plastic in motion.

The Doctor leaned in to inspect the assembly line, nose touching the glass. ‘Well, dash my buttons! It really is a delightful polymer you’re working with here, you know. A new material for a new age! Hyatt developed the first synthetic polymer in 1869, and humanity has been improving the process ever since. Durable, adaptable, far more easily produced than ivory, which I’m sure the elephants appreciated. And now here we are in a building practically made of the stuff. Why don’t *you* tell me more, Nessie? Is everything in this factory, besides this glass of course, truly made from the plastic you produce?’

The guide had made her way to a control panel in an alcove by the door. As she fiddled with a few buttons, she answered the Doctor, ‘Almost entirely, sir, with a few rare exceptions.’

‘And what are those exceptions?’

Ness breathed in, almost a sigh. ‘If you give me a moment, we have a voice recording for this part of the tour that should answer all your questions.’

The Doctor frowned. ‘A recording, that’s all? Where’s the charm in that?’

‘I don’t know about charm, sir, but it is terribly efficient.’ A flick of a switch and the music swelled into a cheerful, if a bit too grandiose, tune.

Welcome to Nesston’s Factory of the Future: Moulding and Shaping Our World Today…

‘Terrible is the right word for it,’ the Doctor grumbled. His guide shushed him. A strange thrum echoed through the tunnel; the lanterns glowed with a sudden surge of power. He stepped closer and raised his cane to tap one, but Ness quickly caught his hand and shook her head.

…Mr Nesston started his company as a simple toy factory, creating dolls such as

these, but progress marches ever forward...

The Doctor carried on, slipping out of Ness's gentle, if firm, grasp. He peered past the assembly lines and noticed the emptiness of it all. Rows upon rows of mechanical arms, made of the same gleaming plastic as the products they assembled, moved with slow, graceful precision. A beautiful dance to be sure, but without an audience to appreciate it.

...no longer fear loss of life on the factory floor, as our machine friends carry on their work with Nesston staff keeping a close eye from the decks above. Be sure to wave hello!...

The Doctor stopped and gestured to the second floor. Observation rooms dotted the catwalks. Each one was empty. 'Nessie, where are all the other staff?'

Ness took the opportunity to get ahead of the Doctor, marching along toward the end of the tunnel. 'Isn't it nearly lunch? I'm sure they're being taken care of – oh. Oh my.'

Another thrum; the lanterns glowed brighter. On the right side, completed dolls tumbled over each other in untidy piles. One doll's costume was singed, and another had her eyes embossed on the top of her scalp.

Ness hurried to the end of the tunnel and ducked through the door to the factory floor. The Doctor followed after at a more leisurely pace, inspecting the malformed dolls. 'I like these better. More character to them.'

Ness beelined to the source of all of the line's (and some of her own) problems. She stepped up to the malfunctioning machine and flipped open a panel. 'Nothing's out of place. What's wrong with you?' She spoke as if to a wayward child, brow furrowed. She slipped around to the other side, searching for a fault. But with a little cry she found something else distressing: the dolls had piled up, jamming the conveyor. Pulling dolls off the line, she murmured, 'You do know you were supposed to *eliminate* human error? What is this?'

Burbling with mirth, the Doctor leaned over on his cane and watched. 'Truly revolutionary! A time-saving wonder! Say, how do you know how to operate everything? Oh! Nessie... Ness...ton? Any relation? Named you after himself, did he? The presumption, the nerve, the ego. Never mind the rest, do *you* like your name?'

Ness fought against the conveyor, clearing the line of defects. Every step she took toward the controls, she stopped, pulling away shaggy dolls whose hair was rooted heel to head. 'Is now really the time for this?'

'An excellent question!' The Doctor stirred to his full height, as though at the centre of the circus ring. 'An excellent question, indeed! If we asked Dante in his cold exile, he would reply that time only exists as real to those of us caught in its passage. True time is an eternal moment beyond us and this world. If you asked a man of science, he would tell you much the same thing. If all time is one to an outside observer, surely this moment is as good as any other. You see...'

But *he* was the one who suddenly saw something.

Ness stood just beside the towering machine. Above her, one of the jointed mechanical arms shuddered, swinging over both of them at violent speed.

At the end of each arc, the arm's joint cracked like a whip and swung closer. He saw it could only end in a way that would give Poe shivers – smashing into their heads.

He had to do something. Snapping his fingers, six sharp black dice slid into his

hand.

The arm's joint growled, and with a final shudder it slipped and swung for Ness' head.

But with grace, he reached past her and jammed his dice into its joint. They imploded into one perfect metal die large enough to hopelessly choke the mechanism. With an angry screech, it stopped.

'Like holding open a lion's mouth! I hoped to debut this at the Egyptian Hall. But I suspect you'd appreciate it more.'

Ness tilted her head, inspecting the die for a moment. 'Charming.' She stepped around the Doctor and his trick, reaching to open a panel beside the mechanical arm. Inside, they found a row of switches. She flicked all of them down.

The conveyor line came to a stuttering stop. Ness gave a single, satisfied nod. 'Now that we've taken care of that little issue, why don't we get back to the tour?'

'I'm never one to turn down a trip, Nessie, but are you sure everything's alright?' The Doctor stepped over to her.

'Certainly. Just a simple malfunction, easily fixed.'

'That's the only thing you see wrong with this place?'

Her expression remained calm, but the answer came out sharp and quick. '*Yes*.'

Ness marched on once more, back to the tunnel and the next part of the tour. Now slightly elevated, the tunnel wound around the equipment. Industrial mixers and rollers rose to the ceiling around them. Red mixers melted down the raw plastic, and fed it into blue rollers which prepared the plastic for casting. Rows upon rows of taloned mixers rested on each end, groaning in place. A heavy pot trundled overhead, spilling rough plastic beads down into the vat.

The mixers churned through the beads. At first, they merely heaved through them in a crackling cascade. Somewhere below the mixer, a furnace ignited; the Doctor felt the heat through the glass. As the beads melted they became shiny, then sticky like long taffy strands, then simply a shifting sea of plastic.

...Now that the material has been transformed from a molten liquid to a material we can manipulate, we can use it to make everything in your world!...

'If I might be so bold to comment, as I am something of an expert on timing... our automatic guide has lost his place.'

Ness allowed herself a soft sigh, chiding the Doctor, 'Please, sir, don't talk over the tour. Our previous, ah, *break* put us off pace with it. We'll catch up to it if we keep on.'

'No use trying to force things, Nessie. If we're off the script, it's time to improvise!' He raised Chuckaboo to meet his eyes. 'What do you say, shall we put on a show to remember?'

The cane blinked. The Doctor waved Chuckaboo at the nearest speaker. Chuckaboo's golden head burned bright. The tape slowed down, voice track tearing, devolving into static.

'Now then!' The Doctor bowed to Ness.

'Look around you! Marvellous innovations and startling automation – straight from the mind of Mr Nesston! What a long way you've come from Ransom Old's first assembly line, all the way back in 1901. Henry Ford had a problem. Motor cars were a specialised, difficult thing to build. But then he installed a conveyor belt and produced an automobile every 90 minutes! Not too long ago they experimented with adding mechanical arms to the process. And oh, Ness, the

things I'd love to show you about the amazing future of 1990! They'll make devices sooner than you could blink!'

Ness paid the Doctor's speech little mind, stepping over to the sabotaged speaker. Opening the casing, she frowned at the burned-out tangle of wires. 'Sir, there are fees for damaging Nesston property.' Instead of worrying about fees, the Doctor's eyes were drawn to a latch and hinge on the tunnel. A maintenance window.

'But none of *those* factories were as empty as this one. Even the robot run – and owned – car manufacturers of the future... even those of the great motor city, Chicago... have sentient workers. Just as humanity has limits, so too do mechanical people. In light of this most curious of curiosities, I think we should take a closer look. Let's see where your fellow employees might have gone. Are you ready for a more thorough tour, Nessie?'

'No, sir, I *really* don't think – '

The Doctor opened the maintenance window. 'Friedrich Frobel – Fred to his friends – fought against the limited education of his day. So he invented toys to teach the unity of the universe, and the joys of investigation.'

He held out his hand in a grand gesture, asking Ness to observe. He stepped out onto thin air – and vanished.

Observe she did, jumping to the window and sharply glancing over the factory. Something scraping by her feet caught her attention. The Doctor held onto the edge of the tunnel by Chuckaboo's assistance. He put a finger to his lips. 'Now that you've seen this, I must swear you to secrecy. You must never reveal a magician's tricks.'

He dropped the remaining feet to the workfloor, waved to Ness, and carried on.

'Dear Fred felt the best way to learn, you see, was to discover everything first hand.'

As he disappeared around one of the great machines, he added, 'I aim to follow in his footsteps.'

Ness followed in the footsteps of the factory's designer, and took the proper exit. She rushed through the factory, peering around machines that reached for the ceiling.

She heard him quietly speaking. 'I'm concerned, Chuckaboo. This place should be booming with life...'

She found the Doctor on his hands and knees, inspecting, presumably, for clues. 'Ah! Good, you've caught up!'

Ness tapped her foot. 'Honestly, sir, this has put us so far off schedule. At this rate we're going to miss the next showing of the Nesston Plastics Puppet Show.'

'But now we are learning for ourselves! Isn't this exciting?' The Doctor looked under a workstation. 'Now, back to our earlier conversation. What is your relation to the mysterious Mr Nesston? And where is he, exactly? I haven't seen so much as a picture of the man around.'

'Mr Nesston is a father to the whole factory, sir. But I am not in the habit of keeping track of my boss. He doesn't make many public appearances, preferring to work in obscurity.'

He marched to the side of a mixer, and craned his head back. 'Ah, what do we have here?'

Some way above, a scrap of fabric was fused into the plastic. Caught only by

the edge, it jittered as the machine worked. He reached up as far as he could, fingers just brushing it

He lowered his hand and turned to Chuckaboo. ‘I may need your brand of assistance, my dear friend.’

Above them, the mixer wheezed, plastic waves washing harder against the sides.

The Doctor raised Chuckaboo, catching the fabric between his friend’s glowing head and the side of the machine. He tugged, and the fabric fell. With a flourish, he swung Chuckaboo down and caught the fabric on the cane. As he spread it in his hand to get a better look, he winked at Ness.

The mixer buckled. Thick streams of plastic ran down its sides. One rushed along an extended lever, gathering into a drop.

The fabric was graced by a Nesston logo. The Doctor’s face fell.

The drop fell, splattering on the fabric, sizzling through. The Doctor peered through the new hole.

Ness, absorbed by the controls, turned a dial just so. ‘This will put production back. It’s terribly inefficient to go about business this way.’

Chuckaboo lit up. When the Doctor didn’t look, he glowed blindingly bright, focusing his beam upward. The Doctor squawked, but at Chuckaboo’s urging, he looked up. A wave of the material hung on the mixer’s lip.

Grabbing her arm, the Doctor pulled Ness out of the way. The material spilled over the side, engulfing the controls. When the material passed, all that remained of the control panel was a shiny, melted mass.

‘We really must dash!’

He pulled her into a run. She slipped out of his hold and turned around with perfect calm. She gazed at the destroyed controls, and informed the mixer, ‘At this rate you’ll destroy the factory.’ As it sputtered and spat, she grabbed hold of a maintenance ladder and climbed upward. Like a bath left running, hot plastic welled over the mixer’s edge. He watched as she climbed the ladder – and worse, as the plastic dribbled down the ladder, splattering rung by rung.

He began to run back. Chuckaboo blinked wildly in warning.

As the hot plastic dribbled down toward her, Ness dodged away. She stepped off the ladder, and onto the complex system of pipes and dials which kept the machine working.

‘Oh, good show, Nessie! I’ll find a way to help!’

Chuckaboo’s blinking grew all the more urgent, and the Doctor realised the hot plastic had snaked toward him. ‘Oh, yes! Lead the way, sir!’

Ness pulled herself to the top of the machine. She stood on a raised platform, reared on rebar struts above the plastic sea. Residing on the edge of the platform above the sea was a bank of controls. She approached them, setting to work.

Chuckaboo flashed in the Doctor’s hand. ‘You’ve found a way out?’

The mixer worked fast and faster, smoke rising from its gears. The material poured over the sides in great waves. Plastic sizzled against the platform’s railings. It splashed higher and higher, washing over the banks, and towards Ness.

Running around machines and jumping over pipes. Chuckaboo urged the Doctor to take sharp rights and lefts, in a crazy path to stay one step ahead of the pooling plastic.

A sturdy door stood in the wall. Reinforced and bolted, it would not yield to the

plastic. There was only one problem: the plastic lazily snaked between the door and where he stood. With every second, it grew wider, from a mere tributary to a stream to something threatening to become a river.

Ness didn't flinch when the plastic hit her. It had only splattered across her uniform, and she looked at the splatter with distaste. Then with annoyance at how it had washed across the controls. Small holes burned in the material, and the switches no longer responded. 'Must you make everything this difficult?'

Retreating a few paces, the Doctor readied himself for a running jump. 'Off we go, eh, Chuckaboo? Let's put the Sheffield Flyer to shame!' He took off and jumped just at the edge of the plastic. In mid-air, he realised he wouldn't quite make it.

Working fast, Ness pulled a cluster of cables from the controls. Peeling apart a set of wires, she took the component which watched for electrical overload and placed it directly into the bank's power feed. The mixer jerked, pushing one more wave of plastic over the rim, and fell silent. As she waited for the plastic to cool, she looked around for the Doctor. There was no sign of him.

She picked her way down the side of the mixer, and walked over the rough but cool plastic. The floor was an unforgivable mess. But she allowed herself a smile for the quality of her work. She made her way to the staff exit.

'Hello!' called a voice from the floor. The Doctor lay in a crumpled pile beside the door.

Ness jumped back, placing a hand on her chest. 'How on earth did you get out of that? I thought you'd died.'

'No, no, manifestly not! I didn't quite jump far enough and landed one toe in the plastic. I made an awkward sort of hop and made it. But I lost part of my shoe! I had it since 1828...' He shook his head sadly, then brightened. 'Dash my buttons, Nessie, good show! Quick thinking, and cool as a cucumber. If only there were more people like you around.'

Any previous concerns of Ness's melted away, replaced with a smugness. 'If only.'

'And of course, more people like Chuckaboo too!'

She opened the door without response. Chuckaboo's light sputtered. The Doctor patted his head. 'There, there, I'm sure she doesn't mean anything by not thanking you.'

The Doctor caught sight of the plastic splatter and stepped toward Ness to check her over. She waved him off with a dismissive flick of her wrist and he caught a glimpse of the warped cuff of her sleeve, but no further damage. 'Not a scratch, sir, Nesston plastics are made of tougher stuff than that.' She seemed ready to launch into a sales pitch, handily memorised, but thought better of it. With measured steps, Ness returned them to their path.

They pushed ahead, out the door, and into the factory itself. The tour tunnel ran alongside them.

They stood in an immense room, and the sight stole his breath. Steel rivets extended from the plastic floor in neat rows. A robot on rails scurried across the ceiling, hard at work. It extended multiple arms, spraying foam down just as many rows. When it met the air, this foam expanded, multiplying in size, latching onto the bolts. Hardening almost instantly, the foam was built up into a solid wall.

The Doctor's eyes lit up. ‘Bless me, you're building the factory!’

The robot stopped spraying mid-row, and rolled toward them.

Ness directed him to look at the observation room above. He saw the tour tunnel emerge there, bookended by massive computers. And at the centre of the room, a beige plinth about his height lorded over the room, topped by a glass case. Behind the glass, something pulsed red. ‘As impressive as this no doubt is, if you’d have let me lead you I could have shown you the very heart of the Factory. It guides and instructs all of the workers, mechanical and otherwise. In a way it is Mr Nesston's heart too, carrying out his wishes.’

The robot paused above them. It hummed as it cycled through its systems, preparing for its next task. It levelled its nozzles with precision.

The Doctor suddenly jumped around to Ness’ other side to get a better look.

The robot fired foam at them, splattering their clothes as the spray cut toward them in an arc. The Doctor shoved Chuckaboo in the way of Ness’ face. The form wrapped around his head, expanding into a choking clod.

‘Let’s go!’ he called to Ness, and took off toward the far door.

The robot went wild as it chased them, sloshing foam across every surface. Arms knotted in the air above them – and around the freshly built wall, shooting without control. The arms ripped into the wall. The floor groaned with struggle, and the Doctor pulled Ness away. The wall was pulled up and crashed over before the machine sagged down, its arms trapped underneath. Beside the wall, the steel bolts lay jagged and bent.

The Doctor tapped the wreckage with Chuckaboo, and whirled on Ness. ‘The Factory, it isn’t just automated. It’s *alive*! It has a will of its own, and unfortunately it seems to have taken Mr Nesston’s wishes a bit too literally. How did you put it earlier, “*eliminate* human error”? If it truly has intelligence, it can perhaps be negotiated with, but...’ He stopped and leaned toward her, voice falling into a hush. ‘We should get you out of here. The factory wants to get rid of its human workers and that includes the tour guides.’

Ness marched onward without so much as a glance his way. ‘I assure you I have nothing to worry about; I know these machines quite well. We’re almost finished here and I’d hate to waste any more of our time.’

The Doctor reached for her arm, gently, and for the first time she flinched. *‘Ness.* Please, listen to me. Whatever reasons you may have for keeping up appearances, they aren’t worth your life or anyone else's. I can help you.’

Ness studied him a moment, a flicker of emotion crossing her face, and just as quickly disappearing. She answered in her most professional tone, but weariness crept in at the edge. ‘Let’s finish this tour, sir.’

At the grand finale, the lights flickered wildly. Sparks shot from the control panel. Ness sighed, glancing up at the faltering polyhedron lamps. ‘Too much to hope for that *something* might be working as intended? Ah, well. I know this part of the tour by heart.’ Taking inspiration from him, she guided the Doctor’s attention with a grand gesture.

‘Before you leave the Factory of the Future for the world of the present, take a look at our newest fashion line. Amazing, isn’t it?’

Even with the factory in such disarray, the display was impressive. Beyond a grand arch rose seven sleek black platforms, six of which held mannequins. Ness beckoned the Doctor to get a closer look.

'Never again must one worry about creases, tears, or colour fading. Malleable. Versatile. Nesston is prepared for every occasion.'

The Doctor stepped into the middle of the dazzling display. A girl in a sporty red tennis outfit, posed to swing. A man in bright orange workwear, leaning on an elegant spiralled jackhammer. A woman crouched in a soft yellow sundress, gardening with a plastic trowel. A young man dressed in a sharp green suit, ready for a night out on the town. An older man in an indigo polo shirt and slacks leaned on his cane. Finally, a woman in a daring violet evening dress, cut just a hair's breadth away from scandal. A rainbow of colours, the Doctor realised, except one was missing...

'Nesston's plastic makes the world more durable, adaptable, and far more efficient.'

There she stood in that navy blue suit. Not a hair out of place. The perfect model of a Nesston employee. She studied him with those sharp eyes, and yet this time she smiled, genuine but wry. 'Well, Doctor, how did I do?'

The Doctor smiled back. He raised Chuckaboo to her with glee. 'Oh, Ness, you did beautifully. You promised me a tour of the factory of the future, but you showed me something *precious*. Saving the best for last. You, my dear. You're *living* art. Do you realise that?'

Ness blinked in surprise, lost for words. She looked over his shoulder. The rest of the rainbow came to life, shambling, stumbling off their platforms.

The Doctor spun around. 'Oh. The factory was never after *you*, was it?' He looked up, addressing the factory itself. 'I know what you're doing. A fresh new consciousness still trying to figure yourself out, aren't you? You are doing something amazing, but in the wrong way. There is a better path, and I would lend you all my aid in finding it.'

He took Ness' hand and tried to back away. She stopped him, her grip stronger than steel.

She shook her head. 'We're almost finished here, and I'd hate to waste any more of our time. You're wrong about all of this. We know *exactly* who we are.'

The Doctor raised his cane. 'I'm quite sorry.' Chuckaboo emitted a blinding flash, and Ness stumbled back. He ran, pushing out back into the tour route. Posters lined the wall advertising the fashion, from striking portraits of the garments back through design material.

'Ness, you must see how little it cares for you, treating you like mere collateral. You would have died alongside me!'

'Your prying caused the problem! If you'd just let me do my job, none of that would have happened.' She followed behind the other shambling mannequins, keeping a close eye on them as they adjusted to their new consciousness. She frowned.

As stiff fingers caught at his coat – as the young man in green and the daring woman in violet tried to hold him still – he broke free, running into the room. The factory's heart stood before him, its pulsating red display looming.

'We will have words! You can't live your new life this way!' The Doctor strode up to the Heart, looking right into the glass box mounted on top. 'The people here were as alive as you!'

The rainbow of mannequins rushed after him. Ness stopped, watching from the doorway.

The Doctor ducked under the older man's cane, defecting the woman's garden

trowel with Chuckaboo, and darted around the Heart. Aiming for the Doctor, the sporty red mannequin hit the side of the Heart's display when he dodged. It nearly tipped over, and an angry static buzz filled the room.

'Stop! We needn't have another death today!'

Powering on his jackhammer and raising it at the Doctor with impossible strength, the workman sought to impale him. The Doctor lunged out of the way. The jackhammer tore into the display and box. Glass shattered.

A metallic scream sliced through the factory. Groaning emerged from the depths, shaking the floor. Serrated gaps ripped along the ceiling; it tilted in, threatening to crush them all.

Ness captured the Doctor's hand, pulling him into the hallway.

The ceiling crashed down, whole but with broken steel rebar protruding from the ends. The control room was gone, and all in it.

For a moment Ness stood still, staring at the mess. 'So single-minded, too focused on their one task. Ruined the whole thing.'

With unerring steps she pulled him along as the factory ripped itself apart around them. The great machines tore in half, spilling half-finished product, as they raced along the manufacturing floor. The building tilted precipitously, spilling rubble around them, as they ran out an exit and across the garden. In the end, they stood quietly near the Doctor's ship, the scale of destruction only just sinking in.

Pieces of the factory sloughed off the smouldering wreck, sizzling in the moat. The Doctor's shoulders sagged. 'All this wonderful potential wasted in the name of power and efficiency at any cost.'

He turned to Ness and brightened.

'You must come with me in my ship! I can show you robot-owned plants! The true factories of the future, where your kind works hand in hand –'

He took her hand to give her his own tour, but she slipped away.

Click. Click. Click.

Those sharp heels carried Ness away from his ship and over the cracked pavement. She peered into the moat and caressed the wreckage like one might a child. She ran her hand over one of the shattered steel rivets.

'Ness!'

She pulled her hand back, without a scratch.

'It truly is a marvel. A miracle. Steel shattering before our plastic ever did. Some kinks need to be ironed out, but with the right hand to guide it...'

She turned to him with bright eyes. 'Doctor, you wanted to show me the future, show me wonders, but I've already seen it. Right here, with me.'

The Doctor looked at her carefully, voice quiet. 'You are a wonder, and a work of art. But so are humans, so am I, so is Chuckaboo. If you'll build the future, you must remember that.'

Ness grew thoughtful, inspecting him once more. 'The Factory didn't adapt as quickly as you did to the situation. I'll be sure to keep that in mind. Whatever I work on next, I'll be sure to include the human element.'

RETROGENESIS, Part 8

by Philip Purser-Hallard

Excerpt from *The Lively Planet*

'Well, Chuckaboo, I think that wraps it up splendidly, don't you?'

The Doctor surveyed the planet on the TARDIS scanner, with the satisfaction of a magician contemplating a perfectly-delivered trick. He had spent a thoroughly charming time on the world that had once – before the Zenithal-Calendal war, before the time of wisdom and prosperity that had preceded it, back when the megabeasts and tribesmen had roamed its landscape – been known as Arkos. To be sure, the post-apocalyptic accommodations had been a little... rudimentary... but his hosts had been among the most gracious, and the most high-spirited, he had known.

Of course, they belonged to the more congenial branch of the family. The others... well, he'd prefer not to make their acquaintance for a while. 'It all seems to have worked out very well,' he mused to himself as he hung his top hat on the hatstand. He kept his cane with him, though. It helped him to think.

'For now, our convivial friends are recovering from the war, while their physical bodies perfect themselves over the generations. And their opposite numbers are skulking in their electrical city, developing their ever more sophisticated machine-bodies. One fine day, when the atomic war is long forgotten, they'll meet, and their philosophies and technologies will combine to create the civilisation that becomes the Kelda. It all seems most gratifyingly on track, if I do say so myself.'

A shadow crossed his cheery face, and for a moment his voice became troubled. 'Not that the path that led us here is one I'd care to waltz along again, my dear. But all's well that ends well, isn't it? The two species are safely separated for now. Provided the machine-people stay in their city, and the beautiful people keep to the Peaceful Way our friend Alylec set out millennia ago, they'll ne'er the twain meet until they're good and ready. And just as well – a universe without the Kelda scarcely bears thinking about.'

'What's that you say, Chuckaboo?' He held the walking-stick up to his ear for a moment, in a pantomime of listening to a child's whisper. 'Could I be wrong? Oh no, I don't think so, not now the planet's history is isomorphically locked. No time-traveller can visit it except me, and I'm hardly going to blunder in and undo all that hard work, now am I?'

Whistling, the Doctor set the controls of his TARDIS. 'Where shall we away to next, Chuckaboo? Earth again? Very well, if that's your choice. I have to admit I miss the place.'

And moments later, the Doctor was off on another exciting adventure.

THE QUEEN OF BOHEMIA AND THE LAUGHING TARDIS

by Paul Driscoll

If you didn't already know her by reputation, you would never believe that the paranoid, dishevelled old lady who was half-way up a royal tree sketching used to move in the most exclusive of artistic circles. But such was the tragic life of Nina Hamnett; once regarded as an enviable woman of substance, these days she was more likely to be looked down upon as an advert against substance abuse. Where once she had beguiled fellow drinkers at the Fitzroy Tavern with tales of her incredible encounters with the likes of Picasso and Orwell, now she was the subject of the most scurrilous gossip. In most people's eyes she didn't need to write a book called 'Am I a Lady?' – the answer was self-evidently a resounding no.

She had recently taken to hiding until she was too drunk to care, if only to avoid the inevitable abuse from passers-by. The once carefree Queen of Bohemia, who revelled in her lack of airs and graces, now wallowed in self-pity, unable to even face herself in the mirror.

Nina looked across from the subjects of her latest drawing to the park bench she'd painted some twenty years ago and reflected on how much her art had suffered because of her poor health. It didn't stop her from doing what she loved best, but her current project was more an attempt at self-therapy than a study in human anatomy. Well, that and a distraction of course – a distraction from the demons that were tormenting her. Nobody believed her stories any more, but she knew those demons were real and that they were coming for her. She was in no doubt that soon they would destroy her completely.

One of the lads spotted Nina in the tree. 'Here we go again,' she muttered. The crater-faced boy pointed her out to his friends and they immediately started throwing stones her way. They were about to come and shake her out of the tree when an intense swirling light and a sudden rush of wind, powerful enough to overturn the bench, almost overcame Nina's senses. On the plus side, the not-so-brave-after-all boys scarpered, but when the blinding light had dissipated and the wind had died down, Nina was left facing a stranger who appeared to have materialised out of thin air.

'All in my head, was it?' she said to herself as she shimmied down the tree trunk.

The stranger was sitting on his knees with his arms outstretched like a man at prayer. For a brief moment it looked as if his facial features were changing before her very eyes, but after a few more awkward grimaces, she decided it was just the contortions of a particularly dextrous and expressive face.

'It's you, isn't it?' said Nina. 'The body is new, but it has to be you...'

The man rubbed his eyes.

'If "you" means "me", then yes I'm me,' he nodded. 'How do you do?' The

remarkable politeness of his tone, so at odds with the violence of his arrival, sent shivers down Nina's spine.

He stood up and dusted down his boldly anachronistic attire – a Victorian gentleman's outfit complete with top hat and a cane. Fancy dress? Well, that confirmed her suspicions. The man who was at the centre of all her worst nightmares had returned from the dead to punish her. He ran his hand along the length of the cane and tried to snap it in two.

'Well dash my buttons, you're okay, Chuckaboo! You need never fear a psychotic medieval novice again. If you can come out unscathed after being flung into the time vortex naked, you can survive anything. Just goes to show you can't beat a bit of Venusian tape.'

There was something almost comical about the way he danced on the spot in time with his sing-song voice, but it wasn't enough to distract Nina from the weirdness of his words.

'Venusian tape?'

'Made with the strongest glue in the universe – the spittle of a Blue-Backed Laughing Spider. And yes, they really do laugh – sounds a bit like this...' With teeth clenched he let out a series of high pitched squeals.

Nina relaxed. If she was right about the man's identity, then whatever magic had been used to bring him here must have completely befuddled his mind.

'And everyone calls me the strange one...' she smiled.

The man's light-hearted persona gave way to what Nina could only describe as a look of absolute dread as if he'd suddenly realised the enormity of his situation.

He looked up to the heavens, his eyes far too intense to be limited to the clouds.

'My ship,' he shouted, waving his cane. 'What have you done to my ship? I insist you bring her back to me right now.'

Nina wanted to calm him down, but the strange glow over his face had started again and within seconds he collapsed. She knew she ought to have walked away, that this was probably a demonic trap, but as he lay there passed out on the damp London grass, Nina felt an irresistible urge to help the stranger, despite their history.

* * *

The teenagers in the park were not the only ones who had seen Nina in the tree that day.

Tony Beecham and Cyril Ladd had been following her for days, ever since they'd first confronted her in a Fitzrovia alleyway. She had feared she was going to be the victim of a terrible assault, assuming that they had targeted her because of her reputation for sleeping around. But their evil intentions were far worse than she could have imagined.

'Don't flatter yourself, love. We don't want a whore's used body,' Beecham had said.

'Well, if it's money you want, you've come to the wrong person.'

'Wrong again – you're the only person in the world who can give our master

what he needs,' said Ladd, who sounded far less educated than his partner in crime.

That's when they had proudly pointed out their matching neck tattoos, a unicursal hexagram with a five-petalled flower in the centre. She recognised the symbol instantly: the insignia of the cult of Thelema. She knew then that the dreams she'd been plagued with these last few months were not the product of an overly imaginative subconscious. She was being groomed by the spirit of a man long dead. The occultist Aleister Crowley.

'It's time to make reparation, Miss Hamnett,' said Ladd.

'Crowley is dead. Let it go. You people are deluded,' said Nina, trying to laugh off the encounter, but Beecham was quick to remind her of the burning guilt she was hiding over Crowley's death.

'Those careless words in your book turned Perabduro into a figure of ridicule for some, and a Satanist for others. You betrayed everything you ever stood for as an artist.'

Talk about hitting the nerve, thought Nina. This Beecham clearly knew more about Crowley than his grandiose aliases. He was obviously well-versed in his master's manipulative ways.

'There's not a day that goes by when I don't wish those words had never been printed. It wasn't my intention to discredit him. You should take it up with my publisher. All I wanted was to tell the truth.'

She should never have confessed so much, because now she had fallen into their trap. She was being pulled in to a point of no return and she knew it.

'Words cannot be atoned for with more words,' said Beecham. 'If you are genuinely sorry, then I think you'll be happy we found you.'

'Just tell me what it is you want from me,' said Nina, tired of the rhetorical games.

Ladd was quick to oblige, which seemed to irritate Beecham who had clearly been having fun toying with her emotions.

'Crowley's spirit is still alive. And with your help his body can be resurrected.'

It would have been an easy statement to write off, the mumbo-jumbo of a religious fool, or a call to participate in a symbolic ritual more harmless than a child's chemistry set, but where Crowley was concerned such practical experiments were not completely inconceivable. Some of the things she'd seen and heard about his cult had been dangerous enough to get people killed. She actually felt sorry for the two young men.

'The dead should stay dead, no matter who they are. You are playing with fire here. Let it go for your own sanity.'

The two acolytes howled with laughter, but Nina had missed the inadvertent joke.

'That's rich, coming from the great firemaker!' explained Beecham. 'Only you have the power to uncremate. You are the chosen one. Your destiny is to change the world forever, to bring into being a new age of freedom, where the number one rule is that all the others are there to be broken.'

Nina had run away that night. In truth she could have walked, because they hadn't even bothered to chase after her. The sound of their laughing behind her back taunted her, as if to say she could never escape from Crowley's induced nightmares unless she agreed. She was theirs and they all knew it.

* * *

Believing they were under direction from the ghost of Aleister Crowley, via the conduit of their branch leader in London, Beecham and Ladd had been reminding Nina through repeated ‘surprise’ encounters of her ‘destiny’, her ‘spiritual calling’, and her ‘penance’. Their favourite memory aid was to set something alight. Last week, they’d even burned down her former flat. They had been about to torch the chestnut tree next to one Nina was hiding in when the mystical wind blew out their flame as it deposited the stranger from the netherworld.

As they looked at each other in bemusement, they saw what they could only describe as the devil in each other’s eyes. In physical terms, their pupils had enlarged to fill their eye sockets and their colours were flickering between the blackest of blacks and the bloodiest shade of red.

‘It is time,’ they said in unison, their voices sounding like the chant of a thousand worshippers. ‘The ceremony must be performed tonight. Our Lord is ready to return to the realm of the flesh.’

* * *

The Doctor came round about an hour later and found himself tucked up inside a tightly made bed in a grotty little room that stank of tobacco and a sickeningly sweet perfume. He was relieved to see Chuckaboo resting against a doorless wardrobe opposite him, with his coat and hat hung neatly inside.

‘Is this your doing?’ he said angrily as he got up. ‘Did I not apologise enough? And don’t you make out it’s my fault – your circuits are back in perfect working order, I can tell you. If anything I’ve given you an upgrade.’

The bedroom door creaked upon and a woman peered inside.

‘Hello!’ said the Doctor brightly, opening the door to welcome her in. She had a face that he couldn’t quite place, but it wasn’t unusual for him to mistake a stranger for someone he knew, given just how many people he had met over countless lifetimes.

She stood in the doorway holding an upturned brass candlestick as if preparing to strike him down. When he reached out a hand to take it, she slammed the door shut and locked him inside.

‘Is this the best you could come up with?’ he said to Chuckaboo. ‘Or are you teaching me a lesson?’

‘What do you want from me...?’ the woman shouted through the door.

‘I ought to be asking you the same,’ the Doctor replied. ‘I take it this is your flat? I might be stating the obvious here, but I’m the uninvited guest, not you.’

‘I can’t be sure this hasn’t been one big trick, but if you were in need of help, it looks like you have recovered now.’

The Doctor looked at his hand. His fingers were dimensionally unstable, shrinking and growing as if undecided about their appearance. He was far from well.

‘Not quite,’ he replied. ‘But thank you for taking care of me. A cup of tea will help, if you’d be so kind. Then I think we need to talk, don’t you, my dear?’

‘I’ll make a pot. But when it’s gone, I want you out of here. And when I say “here”, I mean you’ve got to return to the realm of the undead where you belong.’

The Doctor slumped down against the door. In reality he was just as troubled as her.

‘Dash my buttons, you’re a funny old sort, aren’t you?’ he said gently. ‘You don’t seem to know what you really want. If you’d just unlock the door, I’ll leave now. Trust me, you have nothing to be scared of...’ he looked down at his hands again, ‘...yet.’

‘I’m not scared of you. I pity you,’ she replied, before shuffling away. The distant clatter of china was a welcome sound for the Doctor. It had been so long since he’d enjoyed a nice proper cup of English tea, and after enduring months of his last companion’s herbal efforts, medieval Maddie as he was fond of calling her, he was more desperate for one than ever.

The Doctor puffed his cheeks and stroked his hair. If his suspicions were right, it wouldn’t be long before he’d no longer feel either sensation again. Not with this body, at least. Yes, he was going to make the most of every sip of what he expected would be his final brew with these taste buds. Hopefully he wouldn’t lose his fondness for tea, something that always troubled him whenever a change was afoot.

‘It’s started again, Chuck,’ he said. ‘But it’s different this time. Not surprising after being ejected from the ship mid-dematerialisation.’

Suddenly, the Doctor leapt up. How had he missed it before! He walked across the room to examine an unfamiliar self-portrait signed by a name he instantly recognised. He rifled through the drawer of the bedside cabinet and pulled out a box of red chalk and a sketchpad.

‘That confirms it. Nina Hamnett! I’ve been sleeping in the bed of Nina Hamnett!’ he beamed. ‘I should never have doubted you, my old friend. What a superb choice for my next companion. Timing might be a little off, mind, but that’s down to them for stealing my TARDIS, no doubt. What a shame that fate has come between us before we’ve even begun. The Doctor and the Queen of Bohemia. What adventures we could have shared together! Well, this explains why they’ve interfered. My people would rather I dined with techno-savvy alien despots than an artist who might expose their flaws and put them in their place.’

A loud scream and the sound of breaking china brought the Doctor back to the present with a bang.

‘That’s more like it!’ he grinned, grabbing his coat and hat. ‘Come on my old friend – a terrible waste of tea, but it looks like we’ve one last adventure on our hands!’

The bedroom lock was easily dealt with by a quick blast from Chuckaboo’s sonic handle.

Inside a tiny kitchenette at the front of the flat, a kicking and screaming Nina was being pinned down by two intruders.

‘Unhand that fair lady at once,’ ordered the Doctor.

‘Should have guessed you’d be sleeping with the mystery man already,’ spat the tall and thin one.

‘Hmmm,’ said the Doctor. ‘Mystery is good, but I prefer magical.’ He waved

Chuckaboo as if writing messages in the air until the cane flew at high speed towards Nina's attackers, hitting the slimmer man between the eyes.

'You're useless, Ladd,' said the other, tutting at how easily his partner had been stunned.

'Mr Beecham?' said Ladd groggily, scratching his head as if we was doing a Stan Laurel impression. 'What happened?'

Beecham picked up the cane and charged at the Doctor, but as he went to strike him with it, the cane resisted, repeatedly hitting Beecham in the head. He tried to let go of the cane, but it was as if it had been glued to his hand.

'How are you controlling this thing?' he shouted.

'I'm not. It would appear that Chuck doesn't like you either,' smiled the Doctor. He clicked his fingers and Chuckaboo positioned himself horizontally against Beecham's midriff. As the Doctor made the equivalent hand gesture, the impossibly heavy cane pushed the bulky man backwards until he fell on top of Ladd. The Doctor held out a hand and Chuckaboo dutifully flew back to his master.

'We have a car waiting for you outside, Miss Hamnett,' Beecham snarled. 'You know you cannot fight against your calling. Come on, Ladd...'

The Doctor waved cheerily as they hurried out of the flat.

'Thank you. I thought you were all in this together,' said Nina.

'As usual, I appear to have walked onto somebody else's set,' the Doctor replied. He picked up the broken pieces of the teapot and stuck out his bottom lip.

'I'm sorry,' said Nina. 'The tea's off. But I do have biscuits?'

The Doctor smiled and triumphantly held up the roll of sticky tape he'd been keeping in his pocket in case Chuckaboo needed any more emergency repairs.

'What?' he said as Nina looked at him as if he was completely mad. 'Best tape in the universe. Sticks to anything, and better still, it's completely tea-proof.'

* * *

Soon Nina and the Doctor were sitting around a small table in the living room, drinking tea together.

'Nina Hamnett. The Queen of Bohemia. I'm so sorry I didn't recognise you at first, but it is a true honour to have an audience with you.'

Nina was shocked by how deadly serious he sounded. She wasn't used to such adulation.

'These days, most people cross the road if they see me coming. I'm not exactly in my prime.'

'I've always found that fallen stars are the best kind,' the Doctor replied with a kindness that oozed charm. 'I've long admired your work.'

'That's most kind of you,' ceded Nina, who would usually write off any expression of praise. She knew how technically good her art was, but that didn't translate to sales or exhibitions. Not anymore. 'Most people find it hard to separate the art from the artist, and I'm afraid all my work is tainted now. Even the good stuff.'

'It didn't hurt Vincent,' said the Doctor.

‘Van Gogh? Perhaps I should leap out of the window to win back some love.’

After a brief moment of awkward silence, the Doctor realised she was joking and they both burst out laughing.

‘Enough about me. So tell me, who are you?’ said Nina.

‘I’ve been travelling so long, I don’t remember how or even where it all started.’

‘Could you be any more evasive?’ sighed Nina. ‘At least tell me your name.’

‘You can call me the Doctor.’

Nina almost spat out her tea, much to the Doctor’s amusement.

‘The Doctor? Sounds a bit pompous.’

‘I hate to be too specific. You see, the problem with names is that they can quickly get outdated. One day the face might no longer fit. So I settled for a title. It’s enough to keep me grounded. And to reassure me I’m essentially the same man, whatever changes come my way.’ He paused to look at the hand holding the teacup. ‘And they can be pretty dramatic, I can tell you.’

‘Well, titles can wear out even quicker in my experience,’ said Nina. ‘This is hardly a room fit for a queen.’

‘So what happened to you?’

‘This did,’ said Nina. Somewhat dramatically, she placed a small bottle of brandy on the table. ‘I wish a cup of tea could fix it for me.’

‘Not everything needs to be fixed. It’s okay to be broken.’

‘What kind of Doctor are you?’ laughed Nina. ‘You’re right though, but I’m not ashamed of who I am. I wrote a book about it, don’t you know.’

The Doctor stood up and walked over to the window.

‘*The Laughing Torso*. Great title! Those clowns are still outside, standing by their car.’

Nina downed the brandy in one.

‘I should go with them.’

‘Why? You were doing a good job of fighting them off before.’

‘Because I think they may be right. It’s my destiny.’

‘Oh, poppycock. Destiny is always the enemy of reason.’

‘Perhaps you should ask yourself why I took your trick with the cane in my stride. It’s not the first time I’ve seen wonders that defy all human understanding. Many years ago, in Paris, I discovered I had the power to make paintings come alive. I once turned a picture into a real fire. I was told I am cursed with the firemaker’s blood. It’s tormented me ever since, but now I know why I have the gift.’

‘Ah – the fire at the studio of that old trickster Aleister Crowley... talk about a human so completely out of their depth... Yes, I remember reading about it in your memoires, I made a note to drop in to visit but never got round to it. But what about Laurel and Hardy down there? What have they got to do with it?’

‘Did you not spot the tattoos? They belong to the British camp of the Ordo Templi Orientis. Their aim is to live according to Crowley’s *Book of the Law*. Mostly, it just means performing crazy rituals amongst themselves. They are initiated into what some might call the dark arts.’

‘Black magic?’ said the Doctor.

‘Exactly. But don’t let them ever hear you using those words.’

‘So they’ve come to get you to sign up?’

If only it were that simple, thought Nina.

‘Not quite. They have a special job in store for me. They need the firemaker’s blood to perform a new ritual – one so ambitious, it sounds truly preposterous.’

‘The more preposterous the better,’ said the Doctor, rubbing his hands in glee, before quickly putting them in his pockets when he saw Nina’s scornful expression.

Nina’s solemnity didn’t scare him, but it did leave him feeling incredibly embarrassed about his flippancy. In normal circumstances, he wouldn’t have changed his mood – not even for a friend. The cheerful faux-casualness that his dimple-cheeked face seemed to be especially designed for was one of the things he’d liked best about his current persona. The fact that he now readily accepted he’d been wrong was surely another sign he was about to become a different man again. It was as if he had to feel uncomfortable in his own skin before he could shed it.

‘I’m sorry,’ he said. ‘So what is it this time? A blessing for a…’ He stopped himself midsentence, before he could reel off an amusing list of the most bizarre rituals he could imagine.

‘Through me the ashes of Crowley will be returned to flesh. At first, I thought it had already happened when I saw you appear out of nowhere.’

‘Well, Nina,’ the Doctor replied rather ominously, ‘I think we’d better give them what they want.’

Outside, the two men were looking up at them with their eyes glowing, alien-like again.

The Doctor yanked the window open and shouted down to them.

‘If it’s fire you wanted, you only had to ask!’

He pointed Chuckaboo at the car and a series of tiny fireballs rained down on Beecham and Ladd. Inadvertently playing the comedy double-act again, they danced around each other in their attempts to dodge the missiles.

The Doctor smiled as he charged up the cane ready to hit the car with one final giant fireball, but much to his annoyance, the fireballs started to come straight back at him. He promptly shut the window.

‘How are they doing that?’ he said.

‘Magic, same as you,’ said Nina. ‘Are you deliberately trying to provoke the demons?’

‘I was trying to destroy their means of transport. With technology, not magic.’

‘Enough!’ shouted Nina. Her mind made up, she was already putting on her coat.

‘No. You can’t give in to their unholy demands,’ pleaded the Doctor. He opened the window again. ‘Take me instead,’ he shouted. ‘As you can see, I’m rather good at starting fires.’

‘It’s not your battle. You said it yourself. Just let me go,’ said Nina. ‘I have to do this or I will never get the voices out of my head.’

‘Then we go together. Can we at least agree to that?’

There wasn’t time to argue. Beecham and Ladd were banging on the flat door again.

Nina opened the door and gasped when she saw their colour-switching eyes close up.

‘Tonight he will rise from the dead as ruler over all,’ the cultists chanted in a thousand harmonious voices, before standing there almost statuesque, as if

awaiting further instructions.

'See, how can I possibly say no?' said Nina.

'Curious,' muttered the Doctor, waving at the men. 'I've seen plenty of types of hypnosis, but nothing quite like this. They are both present and absent at the same time.' He clapped loudly in their faces but neither one of them blinked. 'Nina, how many members of the OTO are there?'

'I have no idea, they're not exactly an open organisation. But they have camps all across the world.'

'And they all are marked with the same tattoo, like a badge of membership?'

'I believe so.'

'Hmmm. I need to get a closer look at them... the mark could be a remote link to whoever is in control. There's more going on here than a deluded attempt to bring a man back to life. A higher power is at work and I need to find out who. The fate of the entire planet might be at stake.'

The Doctor was about to go and examine the back of their necks when Beecham and Ladd's snapped out of their trance and their eyes returned to normal.

'It has been agreed,' said Beecham. 'The firemaker and the alien imposter will both come with us.'

'Where are you planning to take us?' asked the Doctor. 'Please don't say the local masonic lodge. It's such a dreary place.'

'Brighton.'

'Oh, I do love to be beside the seaside,' sang the Doctor like an excited child.

'To the cemetery where our Lord's body was cremated,' added the deadpan Ladd.

'Very good,' the Doctor replied cheerfully, as if that was equally worth singing about.

'But our orders are to make sure you come unaided,' said Beecham.

'So the magic wand stays here,' explained Ladd.

'Ah, well, you see. The thing is, Chuckaboo here is a non-negotiable,' the Doctor replied, rubbing his knee. 'I'm not going to be able to walk very far without him. And if you want me to make fire...'

Ladd strolled up to the Doctor and kicked him in the knee. As the Doctor hopped up and down energetically, Beecham snarled at him.

'Don't take us for fools.'

Ladd picked up Chuckaboo and attempted to snap the cane in two.

'Good luck with that,' smirked the Doctor. The smile soon left his face, however, when Beecham and Ladd came under the alien influence again. Two narrow beams of red light extended from their eyes and burnt through the sticky tape, exposing the cane's wiring. Ladd yanked the innards out and threw the broken ends of the cane back at the Doctor.

'If you insist on using it as a walking aid, you'll just have to crouch a bit,' said Beecham. 'Now come along, we're wasting time.'

* * *

For the first two hours of the journey to Brighton, the Doctor never said a word. With his natural life cycle coming to an end anyway, it felt cruel and unnecessary

to be suffering multiple losses. Practically speaking, losing the TARDIS was the biggest blow, but the fact that he could sense it was still out there somewhere made it more bearable. Even if he never saw his ship again with these eyes, he had no doubt that his successor would be hell-bent on finding it. There was always the danger of an extended period of introspective drifting after each change, so at least this would give the new chap an immediate purpose. But dear old Chuckaboo? There was every chance that his next persona wouldn't even care that he was gone. He had come to over-rely on his friend, he knew that, but the sonic cane had been a convenient shortcut out of all kinds of scrapes. He wasn't quite sure what felt worse – the grief over the loss of a friend, or the fear of being exposed as a charlatan. Never had his cover name of choice, Doctor Crocus, felt more appropriate.

'Can't you just tape it back up again?' asked Nina when, under Ladd's watchful eye, they had stopped for a comfort break while Beecham waited in the car. The Doctor had deliberately made himself look ridiculous by trying to walk with a half stick.

'It's what's on the inside that counts, and that, my dear, is in pieces in your flat,' he grumbled.

'Well, in that case,' smiled Nina, 'you don't need fancy gimmicks. Search your soul and you'll realise you already have the power to fix things.'

'Easy words for an artist to say. We are about to experience the unknown, something that I usually revel in because it so rarely ever happens to me. And I'm scared. Me, the Doctor – scared! I set myself up as the saviour of worlds. Forget the planet, right now, just saving your life would be a miracle.'

'I don't need a hero. But a friend? That's more than I could ever have hoped for.' Nina stopped next to a waste bin in the layby. 'Let it go and take my hand instead.'

He wanted to be brave, but couldn't bear to look as he dropped the cane and the tape into the bin. With his own body about to be discarded, it was important to go out gracefully. If he was to be a hero in his final hours, he would have to do it the hard way, gadget-free.

Feeling horribly naked, the Doctor turned to Nina. He wondered if his next body would be a shorter one, because it certainly seemed as if his height had shrunk prematurely.

Taking Nina's hand, and with Ladd following watchfully behind, the Doctor headed back to the car, at once both braver and more scared than ever before.

* * *

It was several hours after nightfall by the time they arrived at Woodvale Cemetery. Beecham parked up outside the locked gates on Lewes Road, from where the Doctor could just about make out the chimney of the dimly-lit crematorium, imposingly set between two structurally matching chapels. Once they were all outside, he did a quick scan, hoping to find an alien attachment to the building that could both explain how Ladd, Beecham and all the other tattooed acolytes were being psychically controlled, and give him a clue as to the

identity of the alien infiltrators. Their technology ought to give them away. It wasn't easy to focus – his next body was probably not going to be blessed with twenty-twenty vision – but with a squint it all looked disturbingly normal.

'Which one are we supposed to be taking them to?' said Ladd.

Beecham pointed to the chapel on the left.

'The consecrated one, of course. As it is written "When he rises, the great dividing myth that stands between sacred and profane, saint and sinner, and life and death will be no more." Soon we will take ownership of every sacred institution and all the nations of the Earth will live united under the rule of Thelema.'

Ignoring the gates, they trundled across a row of trees and hustled Nina and Doctor through a small gap in the boundary wall where several bricks had been removed.

'How convenient!' said the Doctor, wondering why he never had such luck.

'The OTO have friends everywhere,' explained Beecham. 'One of the estate managers made sure we'd be able to get in undetected. We have access to the keys for every location on the site, including the front gates, but we can't risk being interrupted by the authorities in the middle of the ritual.'

'Impressive. I'm guessing he's not the only insider, then,' the Doctor said, spotting a robed figure in the doorway of the chapel.

'That's Lawson. One of the twenty who witnessed Lord Crowley's cremation. He was recently installed as a celebrant here,' said Beecham.

'I read about the funeral in the papers,' said Nina. 'It caused something of a stir.'

Beecham nodded. 'The unenlightened Christian majority accused us of defiling the Lord's house with black magic. They told us we'd never be allowed to perform our own ceremonies here again. So we took steps to make sure we could. Lawson was the ideal candidate, an ex-priest. He fitted into the role naturally.'

The Doctor might not be supportive of the OTO's beliefs and practices, but he did sympathise with their plight. Their experiences of persecution at the hands of a religious majority wasn't all that different from how his own society viewed him.

Lawson greeted them when they arrived at the entrance to the chapel. Underneath the grandiose black and red ceremonial robes, the priest was just a frail, rather doddery old man, who looked as ill-fitting for the occasion as he was for his dress.

'Is everything ready?' said Beecham, who didn't seem at all keen to stay. 'We have brought the firemaker and alien imposter, just as the master instructed.'

'We are waiting on our final guest,' answered Lawson. 'Come…'

Lawson ushered them into the chapel, which had been dimly lit by a few candles positioned around the central aisle and across a long table on the stage. Between them, several marble bowls on matching plinths were filled with some kind of burning incense.

'I recognise that smell,' said Nina. 'It's like I'm back in Crowley's studio again. Doctor, I think we are being drugged.'

The Doctor was more interested in a large earthenware pot in the centre of the table.

'Crowley's ashes ready to be revived?'

‘This is no ordinary urn. The container also holds our Lord’s spirit,’ said Lawson. ‘All that is needed now is the firemaker’s blood.’

‘And one more guest?’ said the Doctor. ‘I’m presuming he will be the mastermind behind this whole operation. Because it certainly isn’t you, my friend.’

Somewhat theatrically, and right on cue, the doors to the chapel were flung open.

The Doctor rubbed his hands.

‘Here we go,’ he said, expecting to be greeted by the alien mastermind.

His jaw dropped when the figure walking down the aisle came in to view.

Dressed in a tightly-fitted black leather catsuit with a red and black cloak that trailed regally behind her, the masked figure silently placed a small marble ornament on a single empty plinth that had been positioned directly behind the urn.

“The Baptist’s Assassin,” said Lawson, bowing in reverence.

The Doctor was disappointed, to say the least. This was all far subtler than he had hoped. Megalomaniac in-your-face monsters usually made the most mistakes and could often be taken down with a mix of bravado and well-timed rhetoric. But he smiled nonetheless. Whether the woman was another human under the influence of an unseen force or a masked invader from space, the ornament itself was the first alien object he’d come across that night. The alien might not have declared his hand yet, but now they were finally getting somewhere.

* * *

Across the globe, Crowley’s supporters were gathering in their meeting places to join in the decremation ceremony remotely. Whether they were using secretly converted living rooms and garden sheds, or repurposed churches and bespoke temples in those countries, like the USA, where they faced the least persecution, the OTO were unwaveringly devoted to the cause.

Their places of worship had all taken a degree of design inspiration from the now defunct Abbey of Thelema in Cefalù, Italy, where Crowley had first formed the new cult. They ranged from a few papered-over handwritten Crowley quotes scrawled on internal walls, to full-blown nightmare rooms that could be used to break down the inhibitions of new members and create a spirit of dependency. There was much variety, both in how each camp interpreted Thelema and how they decorated their temples, but thanks to the travelling efforts of a mysterious masked and cloaked female evangelist, known simply as the Baptist’s Assassin, they all had one non-negotiable element in common – a hand-delivered small marble ornament that matched the member’s tattoos.

The ornaments were all glowing, flashing between the blackest of blacks and the bloodiest of reds as the worshippers formed circles around them. They chanted in alien tongues, dancing around the ornaments in an increasingly stupefied state.

And in a hidden room deep in the inner recesses of the abandoned villa in Cefalù, a far bigger version of the same ornament was crackling with life. Behind

it, an ornate curtain draped across the length of the room blew in time with what sounded like the forced laugh of a not-so-easily-amused child. The pitch of the breathy laughter rose and fell in a pattern that would have been familiar to anyone who had ever travelled in the Doctor's TARDIS. That same sound began to emanate from the ornaments in every single OTO meeting place, including the one that the Baptist's Assassin had just placed on the plinth in Woodvale Crematorium.

* * *

'That sound,' said Nina. 'Behind the laughter... I heard it in the park when you first arrived, Doctor. Please don't say you have always been a part of this?'

Feeling hopeful that he might be able to pull off a successful rescue after all, the Doctor grabbed an arm of the masked woman.

'Who are you?' he demanded. 'And what have you done to my TARDIS?'

'Get your hands off me,' she snarled.

The Doctor pulled off the mask, to reveal the face of a girl who couldn't have been much older than fifteen. Her neck was branded with the familiar tattoo of the OTO. Almost apologetically, and worried he'd been a little too overpowering, the Doctor let go of the girl's arm.

'I was just here to deliver the relic,' she said.

'TARDIS? Your words are meaningless, Doctor,' said Lawson.

'Then how do you explain that sound?' the Doctor asked.

'The winds of change. The spirits are joining us, ready to witness the resurrection of our lord and saviour,' Lawson replied.

'His ways have always been mysterious, but why he should want you here is completely baffling,' added Beecham.

'This is all about me,' said the Doctor, relieved and disgusted in equal measure. 'I thought I'd stumbled across yet another alien invasion-of-Earth plot, but whoever is doing this has manipulated me through you, Nina. I am so sorry you've been used in this way.' He turned to address the alien ornament. 'Well, here I am. Show yourself...'

The ornament began to spin around its wooden, felted base, with the sound of the TARDIS now completely drowned out by the laughter.

The four OTO members froze on the spot, and they began to mindlessly hum, in a myriad of voices the same rising and falling tune of the alien laughter. Their pupils expanded to fill their eye sockets.

'It's happening again,' said Nina, completely unnerved by the colour-shifting eyes.

The Doctor was unimpressed and angrily opened the urn.

'Just as I suspected,' he said in triumph. 'You've all been had. This urn is completely empty. There'll be no blood spilt today.'

'Famous last words,' said Nina as the still spinning ornament careered off the plinth, bounced off the top of the Doctor's head and smashed the urn into pieces. As he tried to stem the bleeding, the Doctor wondered if his words might quite literally prove to be the last thing he ever said. Such was the fragility of his dying

incarnation, even a small knock could trigger the next full body transplant. Nina knelt down to help him, but stopped when she saw what was happening to the ornament.

The blood on the edge of the ornament was spreading impossibly, covering the entire piece. The miraculous blood congealed and bones, organs and sinews began to form inside and around it, with the ornament taking the place of a human heart.

Nina retched as the skinless body, now fully formed, began to move towards them, accompanied by the delirious laughter of the four still paralysed cultists.

As skin formed around the body, she gasped in recognition of the creature's emerging face.

'No, no,' she cried, nursing the head of the now unconscious Doctor in her lap. 'It should have been my blood, not his.'

* * *

Across the world, every cell of the OTO was ecstatically celebrating the resurrection of Aleister Crowley. With every eye still under the strange alien possession, they all chanted in unison:

'He is risen. He is risen indeed.'

* * *

Beecham, Ladd, Lawson and the unnamed Baptist's Assassin had also joined in the chant, while the now fully-formed naked body of Aleister Crowley towered over them.

The demonic figure grinned at Nina.

'Nina Hamnett. Queen of Bohemia. No matter how far you run, you will always be mine.'

'Crowley, you are deranged. This unnatural state cannot be sustained,' said Nina, still stroking the Doctor's head. 'The dead are not meant to live again.'

'On the contrary, it is this world order, full of doubts, delusions, and power-obsessed petty bureaucrats that cannot be sustained, my dear. And I stand before you as the living proof.'

'What do you want from me, if not my blood?' asked Nina, almost egging him on to kill her.

Much to Nina's surprise the Doctor opened his eyes, and having immediately taken stock of the situation, he leapt to his feet.

'You're not the only one who can return from the dead,' he said, grinning broadly. 'Hello, I'm the Doctor and by the looks of you, you could do with a quick once-over. So come on, tell me, what manner of creature are you?'

'I am Aleister Crowley, the new Adam. The first and the last. I have seen a vision, a voice calling out to me from the dark. The human race can and will be the lords of time and space.'

'Well, I'm all for empowering the individual, but it doesn't make sense. You see,

there was I thinking that all that you were really interested in the first time around were the drug-induced orgies. The Crowley I knew was just a boy who never really shook off the condemnation of his Brethren parents. A boy who grew up to become the ultimate rebel. A hedonist posing as a man of faith, manipulating his followers for his own ends, regardless of their welfare and with no respect for the principle of consent.'

'It wasn't really like that,' said Nina, shocking the Doctor by how quickly she came to Crowley's defence. 'He was never the monster everyone said he was. Not until now, anyway.' She looked at Crowley's disbelieving face. 'My publisher took my words out of context – they were twisted to make you look like a Satanist. If I promise to set the record straight, maybe then you'll be able to rest in peace? Because this isn't right. It's not black magic, but it's not white magic either. It's bad magic.'

Crowley's eyes transformed in the same way that Beecham's and the others' had, and Nina was unable to resist as an invisible force lifted her off the ground and propelled her against the stained-glass window behind the table-altar.

'Let her go!' shouted the Doctor.

Crowley turned his gaze onto the Doctor, who soon found himself pinned to the window next to Nina.

'The only bad magic here, Nina, is inside you. And this demonic friend of yours.'

He clicked his fingers and Beecham, Ladd, Lawson and the Baptist's Assassin, looking like four very hungry zombies, surrounded Nina and the Doctor.

'Kill them,' ordered Crowley.

Nina looked at the Doctor as their zombified attackers froze on the spot.

'What are they waiting for?'

'I think the order was meant for you,' said the Doctor.

* * *

A massive explosion that could be heard as far away as Lewes completely destroyed the north chapel of Woodvale crematorium. It would take several days before what little was left of the four victims could be recovered and identified. The OTO would be blamed for hosting illegal after-hours meetings, with the cause of the fire officially recorded as the accidental mixing of hot candlewax with a highly volatile incense based on a medieval recipe. But one mystery would remain unsolved. Besides the four known victims, the unidentifiable blood of two others suggested six people had died that night.

* * *

Nina Hamnett woke up, wishing it had all been a dream.

'I did it again, but this time I'm a murderer,' she said, too afraid to open her eyes and tortured by the images of Beecham, Ladd, Lawson and the girl being turned into human fireballs. 'This is my punishment for hurting Crowley, to make

me the guilty one.'

'Take a look around, Nina,' said the Doctor chirpily. 'You did no such thing.'

Nina had expected to see four burnt-out bodies and the chapel in flames, but instead they had somehow been transported to a completely new location.

'Where are we? What happened? And where's Crowley?'

The Doctor was busy examining a giant version of the ornament that the cat-suited girl had delivered to the crematorium.

'Scattered under a tree in America, I believe,' said the Doctor. 'As I suspected, that wasn't Crowley. It was the work of a master illusionist. A projection, powered by an alien device designed to look like his insignia.'

'Welcome to my domain.'

The ghostly voice coming from behind the large curtains certainly sounded like Crowley to Nina.

'Are you sure about that?' she said.

'Here,' said the Doctor. 'Help me open these curtains.'

'Are we dead, Doctor? Is this the afterlife?'

'Well, it's more *Wizard of Oz* than *Paradise Lost* if you ask me,' said the Doctor.

They pulled the curtains apart to reveal the familiar sight of the TARDIS, back in the police box form it had taken for the Doctor's first adventure in this skin.

'And there's no place like home!' he exclaimed. He grabbed Nina's hand and excitedly opened the TARDIS door.

'Welcome to my domain,' said the mysterious voice again, louder and clearer this time.

'I think you'll find this ship belongs to me,' replied the Doctor, leading Nina inside.

* * *

To the Doctor's horror, the sanitised hospital whites of the TARDIS console room had been overlaid by a restless pattern of black and red shadows.

The time rotor was now the housing for an ever-shifting ghostly face that every now and then was the spitting image of Aleister Crowley, in shades of black and red to match the new décor.

'Who are you?' said the Doctor.

'To the peoples of this world I have taken many names and forms. From the Egyptian priest Ankh-af-na-khonsu to the great occultist Aleister Crowley. And now I have found my perfect vessel.'

'Yes, yes, yes... I can see that,' said the Doctor. 'You're an alien parasite. But what is your planet of origin? What is your original form?'

'Does that really matter? Do you know yours, Doctor?'

The Doctor was taken aback by the question, and began to worry that the TARDIS might have revealed his deepest secrets to the alien infiltrator. Secrets that even he was not party to.

The creature seemed to be enjoying watching the Doctor squirm.

'Nina Hamnett,' it said in Crowley's voice. 'Who do you say that I am?'

'If Crowley is part of this, then you are probably one of the Egyptian gods he

was so obsessed with. Horus, Nuit, Hadit?'

'So many names, but the gods are mere interpretations. I do tend to prefer, Mentu, though. It comes closest to defining me...'

'A Nomad!' exclaimed the Doctor, working it out from the translation of the name. 'You're a Nomad! I always thought you were a myth.'

'Doctor, I don't understand...' said Nina.

'The Nomads are ephemeral beings who have a need for a host that borders on the neurotic. They love to wander around the universe causing mischief, but they hate being formless. Because, without an identity, they never receive the credit or attention for their misdemeanours.'

'And that is why the TARDIS is my perfect host. After Crowley died, I was trapped once again in the liminal. Miss Hamnett, you were Crowley's chosen successor. You were perfect, because you are no respecter of rules, you refuse to be defined or limited by gender or any other human construct. I was to be reborn in you, but at the moment in which I came for you, this traveller arrived unexpectedly in his ship.'

'So you took the better option and stole my TARDIS?' said the Doctor.

'The trouble with any host is that it rather limits your scope. But not anymore – now I am free to travel across all of time and space.'

'So why did you bring us here? Why the elaborate setup at the crematorium? Did you just want to gloat?' asked the Doctor.

'As perfect as the TARDIS is, I still needs hands and legs. And the company would be fun.'

'You want me to come with you? To be your dogsbody?'

'Well, that's what you were for your own people, is it not? Blindly following their directives for fear of losing your apparent freedom?'

'That's different. We weren't trying to cause mischief, we were answering distress calls, restoring the order of things whenever anomalies threatened to destroy the universe.'

'Keeping yourselves in power, more like. Anyway, the choice is yours. How about it, Doctor? Travel with me... and you too, Miss Hamnett. We can be an unholy trinity.'

'Did you kill those people in the crematorium?' said Nina.

'They had served their purpose.'

'I can't travel with a murderer. I might have questionable morals, but that's a step too far.'

'I can live with that,' said Nomad. 'Let's take murder out of the equation. We can just travel for fun.'

'Enough!' shouted the Doctor. 'You are completely insane. You have no idea what you are dealing with. A TARDIS has safeguards built into its design. This partnership will never last. You'll be thrown out into the time vortex, ejected through the waste disposal system.'

'You think I cannot see everything now I am part of her? Besides, if what you are saying is true, why don't you just leave me to destroy myself?'

Clearly getting nowhere, the Doctor changed tack.

'Quite unhelpfully, it's as if I'm pre-programmed to always want to save lives, no matter who they are. I'm a wanderer too, like you. You are right that we aren't so different. And I'd much rather travel for fun than be saddled by the demands of

my people. If I could, I'd run away from them for good. But I'm telling you now, you will not survive like this. My people are far too clever to leave their ships open to an alien takeover. They would rather trigger a self-destruct than see their technology get into the wrong hands. The TARDIS has even come close to killing me. I have a better proposition. Take me instead. I'm dying anyway, so you'd be doing me a favour, giving me a new lease of life.'

'Doctor, you can't,' said Nina. 'It should be me. After all, that was the original plan. I was the perfect choice.'

'I never expected to be in such demand,' said Nomad. 'It's touching, really touching.'

'Choose me,' said the Doctor, 'and you would never have to find another host again. Even a Nomad's lifespan is limited, but together we could walk in eternity, forever rejuvenating each other.'

'We can go nowhere without your ship, Doctor,' Nomad replied. 'You are not as powerful as you like to make out.'

The Doctor danced around the TARDIS console in an attempt to trigger various override systems and jump-start the ship. It took all his mental powers to bypass Nomad's control. After an almighty struggle that left him significantly weakened and just minutes away from renewal, he successfully sent the TARDIS spinning into the time vortex.

Nomad screamed in pain as the Doctor programmed the TARDIS to deliberately trigger a time paradox by returning Nomad to the point of his creation.

'It's killing you,' said the Doctor. 'You have to find another host before the dematerialisation commences.'

'Let it be me,' begged Nina. 'We can continue Crowley's mission to bring about a new world order. You can't trust this man, whatever freedom you think he'll give you.'

'She's just trying to protect me, Nomad. Choose me, you know it makes sense. You will never belong on Earth, they are far too unenlightened. I mean look at her, look what they did to her...'

The TARDIS began to spin wildly, sending Nina and the Doctor crashing to the floor.

When they both came round, the TARDIS was floating gently in space as if all was well with the world. The time rotor was clear again, and the roundels had been restored to their natural shade of white.

'What happened?' said Nina.

'I made my choice,' smiled the Doctor.

* * *

Back in Nina's flat, the Doctor was enjoying one last audience with the Queen of Bohemia.

'And you're sure you won't travel with us?' he said.

'My place is here. Now I'm free of Crowley, hopefully I can escape my other demons. Are you sure Nomad is really a part of you now? You don't sound any different, Doctor.'

'I feel it,' conceded the Doctor. 'It's not like we are separate minds anymore.

The two have become one.'

'You should have let him die in that remarkable ship of yours. I wish my paintings could be bigger on the inside too. The frame, however big, is always so limiting.'

'Oh, don't worry, Nina. This arrangement will be very short-lived, but don't tell me I said that!'

He spotted the remains of Chuckaboo's wiring underneath the kitchen table.

'Everything comes to an end. The good and the bad.'

* * *

Alone once again in his TARDIS, the Doctor placed Chuckaboo's remains in a trunk filled with mementos from his previous lives. Some of these were in pieces too, like the crystal armband and the military radio set. A brass spyglass sat atop a well-thumbed early edition of Goethe's *Faust*. His attention caught for a moment by a dusty gramophone record, the Doctor brushed aside the feather of some enormous bird, and a torn ticket-stub fluttered gently to the floor.

Not that he could remember what most of them had been for, he thought, closing up the chest. Maybe they would come in handy sometime. Probably the same thing all his predecessors had thought, even though he'd never had cause to revisit any of the eclectic items.

He looked at his glowing fingers and could hold it off no more. It was time. The strangely quiet Nomad would never survive the process, but at least this way he wouldn't have to watch the death. In any case, there was a very good chance he'd have no memory of his final adventure. This would be a guilt-free killing, for once.

'Well,' he said to the TARDIS, bracing himself. 'Dash my buttons, who am I going to be this time?'

* * *

Two weeks later, in a small section underneath the latest sensational update on the Woodvale Cemetery fire investigation, *The Times* reported the tragic death of Nina Hamnett. It was an ignominious ending for a woman who had lived such an illustrious life. But when she was falling from the balcony of her flat, she knew she would finally be free of all her demons. The very people that used to avoid her in the street gathered around the body, but nobody noticed the tiny snake-like figure slide off her broken back and slink into the rainwater drain.

Nomad would have to find a new host as a matter of urgency, but for now all he could think about was the Doctor and how he might one day take revenge.